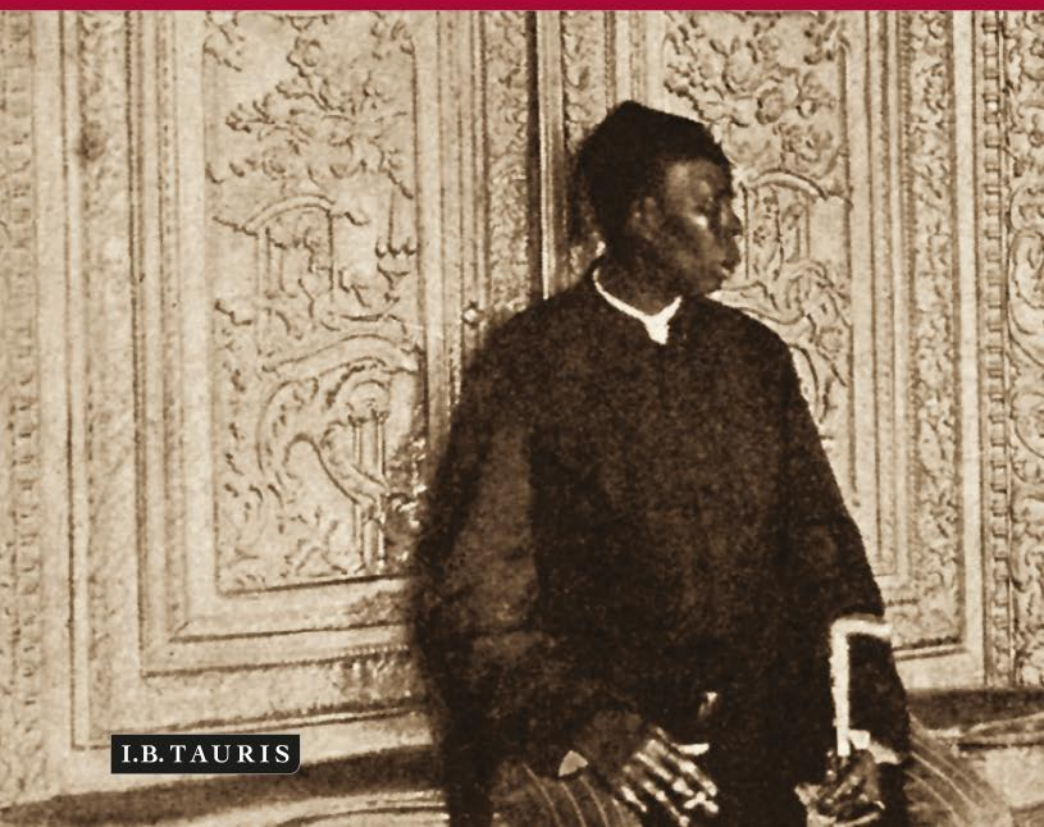


The BLACK EUNUCHS *of* *the* OTTOMAN EMPIRE

NETWORKS OF POWER IN THE
COURT OF THE SULTAN

GEORGE JUNNE



I.B. TAURIS

George Junne is a professor in Africana Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. He is also a member of the Western Social Science Association (WSSA) and former associate editor of its journal. He is the author of *A History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Colored Infantry of the Civil War* (2012). He has been a visiting professor at Boğaziçi University for many years, and is an expert on the role and history of Black slaves and eunuchs.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to examine the histories of the Chief Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire. Variouslly referred to as the Dârrüsaâde Ağası, Āghā Dār al-Sa'āda and Kızlar Ağası, these African emasculated men were centres of power in the Ottoman Empire from 1574 almost until the Empire's end in the 1920s. The reader will become familiar with the lived-experiences of these men, including their histories, their accomplishments and their social and political failures and their successes. Because the accounts of eunuchs are not common knowledge to many, the work will also illuminate aspects of their histories in the Muslim world, in Europe and in Asia.

African American history is replete with references to the castration and emasculation of the Black male, both figuratively and literally. Researchers such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others, for instance, seemed to infer that the disintegration of Black families (even if that theory could be supported) was due to emasculating Black women. 'The emasculated Black man', whether true, partially true or false, is a subject that academic research in Africana Studies/Black Studies has had to confront.

It came as a complete surprise to me what I uncovered during the investigation of this research project. I had known that the Ottoman Empire used eunuchs in their harems, many of whom were African. I did not know that in the palace of the sultans, there was a system wherein African (and formerly White) eunuchs could gain remarkable power.

There might be some confusion as what the word 'harem' means and because it will be used many times in this work, it would be appropriate

to define the term early on. 'Harem' stems from the Arabic root of *h-r-m*, meaning forbidden or unlawful. It also means inviolable or sacred, a secure space.¹ For instance, a military base might have a sign that says 'harem', but it can also be a space within a home or palace that is off-limits except for a few. In the latter case, there is also a sense of sacredness or sanctity associated within the abode. If one violates the harem within a house, palace or other structure reserved for women, whether one does that intentionally or not, one can be justifiably killed, even today in some quarters.

The Chief Black Eunuchs (Kızlar Ağalar) of the Ottoman Empire (more accurately, the Ottoman Sultanate) truly were physically emasculated, but ironically, they were also among the most powerful of men. They controlled fortunes for religious foundations although, remarkably, they were also the personal slaves of the sultans.

Those discoveries led to many obvious questions about the history of eunuchs, the use of eunuchs by the Ottomans, views about Blacks, slavery and Islam, and a host of other queries. In addition, there had to be some comparative analyses on both the trans-Atlantic slavery and Ottoman slavery regarding Blacks. Were the Ottoman experiences anomalies or are they simply a reconfiguration of the same system?

There are also some other very important considerations when attempting such research. Most of the records are in Turkish or Ottoman Turkish, the researcher is from another culture and the context is, in some respects, alien. One has to constantly consider cultural biases and some non-Turkish sources are, frankly, bigoted. Particularly with a subject such as eunuchs, one must avoid the lure of focusing on the exotic and the bizarre. After all (to coin a trite phrase), those men were human.

Some of the Turkish sources seem biased as well. In her book *Three Centuries, Family Chronicles of Turkey and Egypt*, Emine Foat Tugay's account makes slavery under Ottoman rule seem quite benign and even almost pleasant. Born in 1897 to an important family (her father was Commander-in Chief of the First Army), she reported that Ottoman slaves were all part of the family and humanely treated. She also mistakenly wrote that slaves were only employed in households. Indeed, if slaves had problems with the owners, they could easily leave for another household!

One of the prevailing phrases concerning the history of Ottoman, European or African slavery, is that 'those people sold their children'. Indeed, many people did. However, one has to be very cautious with such an off-the-cuff response. In most societies around the world, children are highly valued and the overwhelming majority of mothers do not simply sell their children! It seems that, with admittedly limited documentation, the families selling their children were in wretched situations and the only salvation for children and the families was to sell them, hoping that they would not only survive but also prosper. Many children were simply stolen from their families during wars. Further, for thousands of families over time to sell children there had to be an established market for them.

It is very evident that one can make comparisons between trans-Atlantic slavery and slavery of the Ottoman Empire. Some have estimated that trans-Atlantic slavery swept up approximately 12 million Africans. On the other hand, the trans-Saharan/Red Sea slave trade took an estimated 14 million Africans over the past 1,300 years. Both systems robbed Africa of its human resource, taking people from their families and communities and transporting them to alien spaces where someone owned them. Both systems were responsible for the decimation of hundreds of villages and towns and robbing the continent of its greatest natural resource – its people.

While the trans-Atlantic trade incorporated mostly Africans and some Native Americans (the latter also forced off their lands and even killed), the Ottoman slave system used non-Muslim boys and girls, men and women, primarily for personal service. Specifically, the politics of the sultans' seraglio closely resembled that on the Caribbean plantation of Thomas Thistlewood, where the women with whom he was having sex and to whom he gave small gifts were engaged in power struggles and jealousies. One also sees similar behaviours in prisons, incidentally. With the men caught up in the Atlantic slave trade and the women in the Ottoman slave trade, what are the legacies of those institutions?

Both systems used women as sexual slaves. The seraglio specifically dressed the women (and sometimes males) in fine clothes, gave them money and allowed a few to rise in the system. Most, however, stayed at the bottom as servants. Some spent their childhood on slave farms while at the same time slavers stole children from other families. They might have lived in 'gilded cages' but they were still captives. With the

outlawing of the harem system in 1909, eyewitness descriptions tell of the women happily going home with relatives who traveled to Istanbul to claim them. The African slaves, men and women, boys and girls, eunuchs and non-eunuchs, had no family members arriving to claim them. What were their fates?

There are also references to the ugliness of Africans, which obviously smacks of racism. The more 'ugly' they were the more someone paid for them, both men and women. I am sure that most people have known 'ugly' children who grew to be quite handsome adults, and vice versa. What is behind this notion? Did Turks want to buy Africans who would not sexually arouse men and women and in the specific case of the African women, not have children by the Turks? If one compares again trans-Atlantic slavery where the owner also held the life and death of a slave in his hands, the appearance of the slave mattered little to the men who were sexually abusing them. Certainly, beauty (and even ugliness, if there is such a condition) *is* in the eye of the beholder.

The switch from White eunuchs to African eunuchs as harem guards might also have ulterior motives. Many have written that the reason for the change stemmed from the White eunuchs amassing too much power and controlling too many religious foundations (waqf or vakıf). It appeared that the African eunuchs amassed as much or more power and controlled more funds. Perhaps a more logical explanation was that the White eunuchs were not necessarily completely 'shaved', while the Africans were. Therefore, it was not only probable but also actually possible for some of the White eunuchs to have had sex with the harem women and, perhaps, to sire a child. Because the White eunuchs were European, as were most of the harem women, if they fathered a child few would have known that he or she was not the sultan's offspring. The chance that one of the African men could sire a child was very remote. If he did, it would be highly probable (but not absolutely certain) that some of the child's physical characteristics would indicate that the sultan was not the father. For that reason, all harem eunuchs received a periodic checkup to insure that 'nothing had grown back'.

Combined with the belief that one might be able to discern a child of a Black person from a White person could have been the availability of eunuchs. Europeans may have been supplying fewer and fewer of their people to be castrated for a number of social and political reasons, but Africans may have still been obtainable in great numbers. As the

European supply began to fizzle out, the Ottomans turned to the next plentiful source – Africans. In addition, Europeans began to eliminate slavery in the early 1800s, but it continues in areas of Africa today. Since most eunuchs were slaves, abolition would eventually affect the numbers of European eunuchs.

When one reads about Turkey today, writers usually state that it is the crossroads of Europe and Asia. With the ratio of African slaves in the Muslim world exceeding the numbers of Africans caught up in slavery in the New World by 1.4:1, why do the writers not mention Africa as an element of those crossroads? Who and where are the descendants of those Africans? Are we supposed to believe that *none* of the thousands upon thousands of African women had children by their owners, or that *none* of the sultans fathered any of their children? What happened to the mothers and their offspring? What about the children of African men who were not eunuchs? Have their descendants become present day Turks? This work does not investigate those questions, and those are only a few obvious ones.

Turkey has a number of archives with astonishing records of Ottoman history. There are probably a few personal diaries and journals plus oral histories in basements and attics as well, but very few have emerged so far. What did the slaves, African or non-African, write or dictate about their experiences of capture and sale? What about those who were born and raised in slavery? Where are those records, if they exist at all? In the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the experiences of most of the slaves were horrible. For example, one freedman interviewed in the 1930s said that if he had to do it all over again, he would take a gun and end it. Was it as bad for the Ottoman slaves or not? Where are those voices?

CHAPTER 1

ENSLAVED AFRICANS AS EUNUCHS IN AFRICA AND EUROPE

Africa began to use slaves several thousand years ago and slavery peaked between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, affecting almost all territories. One of the consequences was the shifting of populations; some areas were almost uninhabited through slavery while in other areas, the population increased.¹ Opportunities for trade expanded, beginning with local networks trading for food. Those networks developed into larger ones, evolving into chiefdoms and kingdoms. Slavery became one way to obtain workers, for they 'could be captured, traded for, or obtained as payment from families needing to pay off debts or seeking courtly favours'. Women were important to that system for reproduction as well as production.² Eunuchs had their own niche in the slave trade.

There were also luxury slaves, such as dwarfs; and the very large numbers of concubines possessed by some notables must be regarded as supernumerary. Slave women were not judged exclusively as concubines: those of Musgo, southeast of Mandara, for instance, were especially disagreeable in appearance, but valued for their trustworthiness and their great capacity for labour. But concubines were one of the major single categories of slaves, both for domestic use and for trans-Saharan export; it has been estimated that a majority of the slaves crossing the Sahara were

women and children, in contrast to the Atlantic pattern, and this may in turn partly explain the different subsequent assimilation of the slave population, in North America and North Africa.³

There are accounts that refer to West African slavery dating back to the seventh century. Al-Yakubi noted that the kings of Sudan sold slaves when there were no wars and 'for no reason'. Another chronicler, Hudud al-Alam, noted in 982–983 that most eunuchs came from the Sudan. He reported that merchants came from Egypt and stole children, castrated them and sent them to Europe for sale. He also reported that some Sudanese stole other people's children and sold them to the merchants. Those reports confirm the fact that military systems and organized merchant networks preyed on Black Africans to cater to foreign markets and demands.⁴

Records from the Sudan dating back to AD 1421 show the trade in eunuchs. One leader, the legendary Hausa Queen Amina, received 40 eunuchs and 10,000 kola nuts in tribute from Sudanese rulers. The Sarki (king) of the Kano Kingdom, Abdulahi Burja (r. 1437–1452) received 1,000 slaves a month. He went to what was then the southern area of the empire and, according to the chronicles, built a town about every two or three miles along the route he traveled. At each stop, he left 1,000 slaves – 500 men and 500 women to populate the communities. Yakubu (r. 1452–1462), the son of the previous ruler, traded horses for eunuchs, receiving 12 eunuchs for ten horses. Abubakar Kado (r. 1565–1572) was a very religious man who spent a lot of time in prayer. A manuscript from that time noted that eunuchs were 'very numerous'. The next ruler, Mohammed Shashere (r. 1572–1582), became known for his generosity and was the first to give a eunuch, Damu, the prestigious title of Wombai. He gave two other eunuchs high titles as well. Kutumbi (r. 1622–1648), was a warrior ruler who, when he went to war, had a hundred spare horses of his own plus musicians. Following him were also 'a hundred eunuchs who were handsomely dressed and had gold and silver ornaments'. It is clear that Kano rulers were not only participants in slave trading, but were also familiar with acquiring and making use of eunuchs before the establishment of the Ottoman Empire.⁵

It appeared to be customary in the Sudan to 'geld the most robust of the boys and youths captured in slave raids'. The Mossi punished criminals by castration and thereby supported a profitable trade in them.

They were very skilled in the operation and kept their techniques a secret. A largely Sunni Muslim people of the Volta River Basin the Mossi, now living in the Burkina Faso region, plus the Sunni Muslim Bornuese (Kanuri) people currently living in Niger and Nigeria, were very famous for the trade in eunuchs, chiefly selling them to Egypt, the Barbary States and Turkey. Bornu was one of West Africa's oldest empires, stretching east and west of Lake Chad. There was strong competition because of local demand in the Sudan and Bornu as well. While Turkish merchants might pay \$250 to \$300 for a eunuch, the Sultan of Bornu had 200 in his own harem.⁶

Long before the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the rise and spread of Islam helped to expand slavery throughout northern Africa. Beginning approximately AD 900, people as far away as West Africa were enslaved and transported to Europe and Asia, including Muslim lands. The Prophet Muhammad (the Praised One) lived in a slave-owning society that saw conquerors kill defeated men and enslave the women and children.

The Arab armies, as they spread out across the Middle East and North Africa, quickly learned to reward themselves with the wives and children of the conquered, and as the Caliphate developed its palace cities at Damascus and Baghdad, and its great garrison towns from which the provinces were governed, so a huge international market grew up for slaves of all races and colours.⁷

Ironically, the Muslim world practised formal manumission as well. The Qur'an applauded it and slave soldiers north of the Sahara, at the completion of their training, were sometimes freed. Muslim communities south of the Sahara did not seem to practise formal manumission to the degree of their northern counterparts. However, those slaves could expect to share in the spoils of war and could aspire to own slaves.⁸ By the seventeenth century, the slave trade dominated western Africa. Although steady demand in the Arab world kept the trans-Saharan routes active, the rapidly growing demand for slaves in the Americas eventually exerted even greater demands.⁹

The trans-Saharan slave trade, on the other hand, favoured young women in a 2:1 ratio over men. Males served as labourers and soldiers to such an extent that by the nineteenth century, slaves became important in

the maintenance and reproduction of social and political order.¹⁰ In several regions, eunuchs held that responsibility. The trade in eunuchs continued throughout the nineteenth century in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of the slaves from that area did not end up in the Americas but were taken across the Sahara. Those costly slaves were favoured in civil service and in harems throughout the Muslim world.¹¹ Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut, Mecca, Medina, Jeddah and Smyrna were the centres of demand from eunuchs supplied from the western Sudan from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries.¹²

Meanwhile, some European countries were capitalizing on the production of eunuchs. During the Middle Ages in Europe, the French town of Verdun took pride in its production of them, selling eunuchs to Moors in Spain.¹³ Moors were principally Sunni Muslims.

Moors (from the Latin *maurus*, which is derived from the Greek *mauros*, 'dark-complexioned'), the classical name in Europe of the people of North Africa, who, since the Arab invasion, have been made up of a mixture of Arabs (approx. 40 percent) and Berbers (approx. 60 percent). Morocco and Algeria, and, to a lesser degree, Tunisia and Mauritania, correspond to the lands of the Moors.¹⁴

According to historian Hugh Thomas, the Muslims in Spain bought many slaves. One major source of supply was the territory of the Slavs, whose name 'later became a synonym in Arabic for "eunuch"'.¹⁵

Merchants in the eastern marches of Germany would drive captives to markets in the Mediterranean – sometimes via Walenstad in Austria – or Venice – sometimes via Koblenz, on the Rhine, or Verdun. These prisoners might also travel south, down the Saône and the Rhône, and be embarked at Arles. Thence, crossing the Mediterranean in a middle passage as disagreeable as, if shorter than, that of the Atlantic in later days, they would be landed at Almeria, the main port of Muslim Spain. They might be shipped thence to any Muslim port, even to Baghdad or Trebizond, Cairo or Algiers.¹⁵

The slave markets of North Africa, in the late Middle Ages, held Christian captives from Spanish and Italian ports and villages. However,

for hundreds of years, Arab merchants traded in African slaves, particularly girls and young men 'for use in Muslim courts, from Córdoba to Baghdad, as servants, concubines, or warriors'. Egypt in the tenth century desired eunuchs, as did Baghdad, which bragged that they had 7,000. There was fervent desire for African slaves as far east as Java and China and Muslim slavers satisfied that need, sometimes with women from East Africa. Several trade routes supported the trade in eunuchs.

Many Ethiopians (Ethiopia was the best-known early source in Africa) and Nubians came up the Nile or via ports such as Massawa [now in Eritrea] and Suakin [Sawakin] on the Red Sea; other east coast Africans (some from as far away as the modern southern Kenya and eastern Tanzania) traveled through Somalia and the southeastern end of the Red Sea at or near Aden, Yemen, and the Island of Socotra [Suqutrá]; others came across the Sahara eastward from Bagirmi, Dongola, Darfur, Kordofan, and Sennar in present-day Chad and Sudan and then up the Nile; yet others made the northward journey across the Sahara especially to Tunis and Tripoli (and also Morocco) from source areas such as Mossi territory (present Mali), a wide band of Tuareg country (present southern Algeria and northern Niger Republic and Mali), Damagaram (present Niger Republic), the Ningi region (Nigeria) and other source areas in the central and western Sudan. A Mediterranean sea voyage ended the journey for many of these exports from Africa.¹⁶

One of the most famous eunuchs ruled in tenth century Ikhshid Egypt. The Nubian Abu al-Misq Kafur (Musky Camphor) became the regent from AD 965–968 and from all reports, he was very competent in that position in spite of the opposition he received from certain quarters. The status of most African slaves did not approach that level.¹⁷ Yet, African slaves were essential to an important economic system.

The slave girls of Awdaghost, on the Upper Niger, were prized as cooks, particularly skilled, reported the traveler al-Bakri, at making exquisite pastries out of a mixture of nuts and honey. In the fourteenth century, another traveler, al-Umari, described the empire of Mali, the largest West African monarchy of the time,

also on the Upper Niger, as deriving great profit from 'its merchandise and its seizures by razzias in the land of the infidel.' The successors of the Mali, the emperors of the Songhai, would customarily give the presents of slaves to their guests. In Fez, in the early sixteenth century, the emperor gave Leo the African, a Moor born in Granada who later lived at the brilliant court of Pope Leo X in Rome, 'fifty male slaves and fifty female slaves brought out of the land of the blacks, ten eunuchs, twelve camels, one giraffe, twenty civet-cats [...] Twenty of the slaves,' he added, 'cost twenty ducats apiece, and so did fifteen of the female slaves.' The eunuchs were worth forty ducats, the camels fifty, and the civet-cats two hundred – the high cost of the last item being due to their use in making scent.¹⁸

There were two areas in Africa known as primary sources of eunuchs for the Muslim world – the Ethiopian Empire and the Nupe Kingdom (now Nigeria). Some from the latter locale may have reached the Mediterranean. During the fourteenth century, the making of eunuchs took place primarily in the town of Washlu. The Arab world was familiar with Ethiopian eunuchs because some were guards and servants at the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina and the mosque of the Ka'ba in Mecca.

The Sultan who first placed the eunuchs in the haram [sacred zone surrounding the city, not to be confused with 'harem'] of Medina was imposing the structure of a royal household on the tomb of the Messenger of god. On a political level, the introduction of the eunuchs into the harem was a kind of Sultanization of the Prophet. Just as a corps of eunuchs, themselves symbols of royal authority, controlled access to the private chambers of the Sultan, these eunuchs would guard the hujra [chambers or dwelling that enclosed the graves of the Prophet and Abu Bakr and Umar] which was both the tomb and, in his lifetime, the most intimate area of the Prophet's own household – the chamber of his favourite wife.¹⁹

The overseers of the Harams, or, the sacred zones that extended for miles around Mecca and Medina and in which non-Muslims were forbidden, sought eunuch slaves. Many of those eunuchs were removed

from Istanbul because of age or for political reasons, the latter essentially serving in exile. During the 1850s, there were 80 eunuchs at the Mosque of the Ka'ba in Mecca and 120 at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Some were purchased from Africa as late as 1895 to serve at Medina.²⁰ In a curious 1883 incident, a eunuch working at the Haram at Mecca and who had formerly served Sultan Murad V went to the British Consul to receive manumission. The Consul sent him back to the Haram because he was unsure whether eunuchs who worked there were free men or slaves.²¹

Songhay conquered the Malian Empire in 1468 and dominated West Africa for 300 years, establishing a famous university system. It stretched from Burkina Faso to the south and north to the Moroccan border, west to the Atlantic Ocean and east to the middle of Niger. When the empire of Songhai ruled, the king had 700 eunuchs about him. One of their duties as objects of prestige was to hold out a sleeve so that the askia (king) could spit into it.²² In Zanzibar, one served in the customs bureaucracy as the administrator. Even in Ethiopia they served as servants of the king and sometimes supervised the women.

Nupe as well as Kano participated in the slave trade, including the trade in eunuchs. During the late fifteenth century, one Kano ruler, Muhammad Rumfa (r. 1462–1498), appointed a eunuch to an important state position. In the sixteenth century under Abubakr Kado (r. 1565–1572), eunuchs became common in Kano as that city adopted Islam. According to one record, some believed that Wombai Giwa, a seventeenth century eunuch, was plotting a revolt and he received a dismissal from his office. In the latter seventeenth century, over 100 eunuchs with clothing decorated with gold and silver ministered to Kano ruler Kutumbi (r. 1622–1648). Eunuchs also held important positions in the Songhai Empire under its famous leader, Askia Muhammad (r. 1493–1528), according to explorer Leo Africanus (Giovanni Leoni), a Spaniard educated in Morocco.

He also said that Askia Muhammad I attacked and killed the Hausa king of Gobir, and made eunuchs of his grandsons. A eunuch was in charge of the askia's extensive wardrobe. The chief of the palace eunuchs, Ali Folon, played almost the part of regent towards the end of Askia Muhammad I's reign. Askia Ishaq II [r. 1588–1591], defeated by the Moroccans [1591], attempted to slip away with gold and silver, royal emblems, thirty

of the best horses in the royal stables, and forty eunuchs. A little ironically, many of the early leaders of the Moroccan expeditionary and occupation forces were themselves Andalusian eunuchs.²³

The rulers of the Hausa, primarily a Muslim people residing in present day northern Nigeria and southern Niger, received support through the slave trade and trade raiding enterprises. They levied taxes and acquired other monetary benefits, including the profits from their agricultural slaves. From the fourteenth century, the Hausa also had eunuchs, some of whom were from their permanent slave class, the *cucanawa*. They made eunuchs of both boys and older men for markets in Egypt and Turkey. Although the survival rate of the boys was very low, some still volunteered for the operation in hopes of securing a lofty position. As in other areas of the world, eunuchs were the most expensive slaves.²⁴

By the mid-fifteenth century, the role of eunuchs in Kano civil service was considerable. During the reign of Kutumbi, he was attended by 'a hundred eunuchs who were handsomely dressed and had gold and silver ornaments'. Eunuchs served in both lower positions in the harems and in higher positions as government officials. One of their recommendations as government officials was that they could not establish a rival dynasty.²⁵

King Haji Muhammad al-Amin (r. 1749–1784) received credit for making eunuchs in Bagirmi, a kingdom located in Central Africa. Previously, Bornu (also Borno and Kanuri, one of the most Islamized African states, now in Nigeria) supplied them. When King Haji Muhammad (also known as Mbang al-Hajj Muhammad al-Amin) was in Mecca, he purchased a eunuch for 50 slaves from the Sultan of Mandara. Upon hearing that the sultan had cheated him, he learned how to castrate and performed the procedure himself. King Burkomanda (r. 1806–1846), the ruler who eventually succeeded King Haji Muhammad al-Amin, supposedly owned over a thousand eunuchs.

Eunuchs were rarely found in the possession of private citizens. They were significant in the trans-Saharan exchange, for service in the Ottoman court, or at the shrines in the Hejaz. Mbang al-Hajj Muhammad is reported every three years to have sent to Mecca via Wadai 100 garments, 100 slaves, and twelve eunuchs. The ruler of

Wadai himself would sometimes, on his accession, send some eunuchs to Istanbul.

From the 1840s to the 1880s, there seemed to be a large demand for African 'luxury slaves', the numbers varying from one region to another. Arabs in Central Africa did not own eunuchs according to one report, although the Omani Sultans of Zanzibar had small numbers of them. The kings of Buganda (Uganda region) introduced eunuchism in the nineteenth century under Arab influence. In Darfur (formerly a sultanate in western Sudan) and Ethiopia there were eunuchs placed in high positions.²⁶ Eunuchs were the most valuable of slaves, therefore only the wealthiest Turkish and Iranian-speaking families, 'particularly in Istanbul, Lower Egypt, Iran and parts of north India'. Although the British stemmed the trade in eunuchs in Egypt and India by the end of the nineteenth century, the trade persisted in Iran. In the twentieth century, the trade in exported eunuchs continued from the Gulf of Aden and the northern region of Mozambique.²⁷

Sokoto Caliphate (Fulani Empire of northern Nigeria, southern Niger and northern Cameroon) was a West African emirate during the nineteenth century that also used eunuchs. One quarter to half of the population were slaves since it was 'a political order based on systemic enslavement'. Fulani Muslim and sultan Muhammad Bello (r. 1817–1837) had a home with two entrances, one of which eunuchs guarded because his harem was located nearby. When the Sultan of Sokoto attacked the Hausa kingdom of Gobir, eunuchs comprised part of his army. Agadez, the Saharan tomb site of holy men in Niger, was an oasis north of Kano, and where nineteenth century German traveller and explorer Heinrich Barth recorded that the sultan of Agadez's chief eunuch met him when he first arrived.²⁸

Barth, an acclaimed observer of West African peoples and cultures, also knew Lamino, a lower ranking Bornu official who later rose to become a top political leader in the nineteenth century. He began to monopolize the eunuch trade and when Gustav Nachtigal, a Prussian military physician and an explorer of trade routes, wrote about him, he seemed to have fulfilled his desires. Lamino was 'devoid of conscience' and although the Qur'an forbade the practice of eunuchism, collected 'from time to time hundreds of boys' to castrate. Using the pretext of circumcising the boys, he assembled teams of barbers. They performed the operation and were

'accustomed with a quick grip to grasp the whole of their external genitals in the left hand, and with the right to amputate them with a sharp knife'. To staunch the bleeding, they used boiling butter.²⁹

Eunuchs were part of the Yoruba tradition as well as the Muslim tradition. Again, Barth wrote about their presence in Bornu. Traveller and explorer Dixon Denham, in the early 1820s, reported seeing the Sultan of Mandara (probably Bukar D'Gjiama, r. 1773–1828) with 30 sons and six favourite eunuchs. Others also noted the presence of important eunuchs.

Some eunuchs were employed exclusively in the management of the king's very large harem, but, as in both Bornu and Bagirmi, others held high and responsible positions, including military commands. The harem duties of one eunuch were combined with responsibility for the relations of the government with the Arab population; another, who [...] died as a result of a drunken quarrel between two eunuchs near the royal palace in which their retainers had joined, was a *kamkolak*, the title held by the highest ranking administrative officials of the country. In Darfur [Northern Africa], too, the head eunuch was one of the most important officials in the country, acting as tutor to Muhammad al-Fadl before his ascension to the throne, and as regent when Muhammad became king at the age of 11 or 12.³⁰

In Oyo, a Yoruba kingdom from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries now located in southern Nigeria, eunuchs maintained a significant amount of power. The grand eunuch not only controlled access to the king and controlled the palace, but also 'administered justice in the king's name'. At religious festivals, the second eunuch impersonated the king. The third eunuch also impersonated the king at public ceremonies and received notables at the palace when the king was indisposed. He accomplished those duties while dressed in the king's clothes. In addition, the eunuchs decided which of the king's progeny would succeed him in office.³¹

By the beginning of the nineteenth century in the Darfur Sultanate, now the Sudan, a eunuch had to hold the highest office of state. The eunuch's duties called for complete access to the entire palace complex, including the harem area. While some of the eunuchs were slaves, others

were not. Slaves generally were administrators, soldiers, concubines, guards and attendants.³² Slaves ended up in the markets of central Sudan through raids and kidnapping, tribute or through trade. How did Africans learn about the use of eunuchs?

There is no doubt that the custom of employing slave-eunuchs as civil servants reached the west and central Sudan from the surrounding Islamic states of Egypt and north Africa, as well as perhaps from Arabia, through the influence of Pilgrimage. It helped to make possible the development of highly centralised states, served by officials trained in the skills of organising taxation, conducting war and diplomacy, keeping records and many other activities of state-craft.³³

One of Darfur's most famous eunuchs was Muhammad Kurra, a spear-bearing page who rose to become a favourite of the king. A rival accused him of 'spending too much time with one of the royal concubines'. To demonstrate his loyalty to the jealous ruler, Kurra castrated himself, resulting in his appointment to the highest administrative position in the kingdom. Following the king's death, Muhammad Kurra became the regent. His rivals plus the supporters of the young king killed him in a fight.³⁴

Although Muslims were not supposed to enslave other Muslims, free Muslims would sometimes end up as slaves. Some Muslims would also raid other Muslims for their slaves. Missing from some descriptions of the slave trade are conditions pertaining to the capture of Africans. Raiders would routinely destroy villages as they rounded up captives, also setting fields on fire and killing those thought unfit. The march after the capture could be very cruel such as the killing of laggards to set an example to the others. Sometimes wells in the desert became clogged and by the time someone could clear them, slaves might die of thirst. Slave caravans might carry diseases such as smallpox.³⁵ Defenders of slavery, particularly those who argue that many of those enslaved attained higher prestige than they would have had without slavery, conveniently ignore this aspect. Following is a description of what the slavers did in East Africa.

Whenever a raid on a village took place there was death and destruction. Many more people died defending their homes and

families, or as a result of the starvation and disease which usually followed such violence, than were ever actually enslaved, let alone sold at the coast. As noted by Augustine Ambali, a Zaramo freed slave who eventually was ordained as a priest of the Church of England, 'in those days all over Africa there was terrible trouble for all black men; war everywhere and raiding, and no peace at all.'³⁶

Near the end of the eighteenth century, antislavery and abolitionist public pressure in England forced that country to legislate against it in 1807. In 1833, England made slavery illegal in all of the British Empire.³⁷ The end of European-controlled slavery also meant the beginning of colonialism, an institution that focused on 'legitimate' trade instead of the trafficking in humans. Still, many analysts theorize that economic factors were the major forces behind slavery's abolition. Scottish economist Adam Smith concluded, 'slave labour was both inefficient and counterproductive in a laissez-faire economic system'. Further, he declared that slavery was not crucial in the new economic system of capitalism that emphasized commerce and industry.³⁸ However, it appeared that the Sudanic and North African slave trade was vital to that area of the world.

Slavery and the slave trade were obviously institutions of immense importance in the area as a whole: probably the major stimulus to trans-Saharan trade; an important diplomatic lubricant in relations with North Africa and the Near East; essential for transport and communication within the interior, and for many other practical tasks; a main strength of government; a principal form of currency; an avenue of extending the faith; and a means for the incorporation of large numbers of people into initially small ruling or conquering societies. Central Sudanic statecraft was almost unimaginable without the slave.³⁹

After the Egyptians conquered Sinnar (1821) and Darfur (1874), the Turco–Egyptian regime (Turkiyya) that ruled from 1820 to 1881 expanded rights of the bourgeois class, including the right to own slaves. Along the Nile, slaves began replacing free people in the fields. The jallaba, those 'displaced by poverty and debt from their homes in the

irrigated north or drawn by the lure of easy fortune' began to erect 'predatory new Islamic slaving regimes' to serve the Turco–Egyptian market. Along the Blue Nile, the jallaba established slave labour for the mining and washing of gold and expanded the slave-exporting market. Capitalism became the driving force in the slave trade.⁴⁰

CHAPTER 2

EUNUCHS AND THE BYZANTINE WORLD

Emperor Constantine made the city of Byzantium into the capital of the eastern Roman Empire. Its location on the Bosphorus made it possible for the Byzantine Empire and later, the Ottoman Empire, to control trade between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Slavery was an important aspect of trade in the region for almost 1,600 years. Christians of Byzantium, replicating the slave trade of the Romans, continued to make slaves from prisoners of war. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the trade diminished, but then increased in the tenth century. Jews also traded in slaves, conveying them from Turkistan to Constantinople, and then to Spain and France.

Slavery declined again in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but rose when Russians began selling Caucasian and Turco–Tatar slaves to Venetian and Genoese merchants in Constantinople, who dispatched them to Chios (Khios), Crete, Sicily, Venice, Spain and Egypt. Black African slaves began to appear about the same time, although in limited numbers, and Muslims were noted among the slave merchants before the Ottoman Empire. Eunuchs were among the enslaved population.¹

To understand the role that eunuchs played in Byzantine society, one also has to understand how the Byzantines used that term. The definition changed between the third and twelfth centuries and included people we might not think of as eunuchs today. This becomes important for those studying the subject of eunuchs because the word also encompassed those who not only were incapable of bearing children, but also those who voluntarily refused to procreate.

Thus, until the ninth century the term encompassed anyone who did not as well as could not produce children, including men who were born sterile, men who became sterile through illness, accident or birth defect, men who were lacking in sexual desire and men and women who embraced the celibate life for religious reasons. It also encompassed men who had had themselves castrated voluntarily for personal reasons, including Christian priests who wanted to have easier contact with women parishioners, intellectuals who wanted to preserve their vital body fluids to increase their intellectual powers and men who wanted to have intercourse with women without fear of pregnancy. The term also encompassed men who had been castrated, or whose families had them castrated as children, so that they could qualify for positions at court traditionally reserved for eunuchs. Also included were castrated male slaves from the outer reaches of the empire (i.e., Cappadocia [ancient district located in Turkey], Armenia, the Caucasus Mountains) who were castrated as young children and then brought to the empire and sold, and, finally, illegitimate offspring of the imperial house – such as Romanos's illegitimate son, Basil – who were often castrated and reared as part of the household staff.²

The Byzantine Empire used eunuchs extensively in 'positions of public trust and authority'. Though used by the Romans, in that period they became administrators for the emperors.³ The Byzantine culture expected eunuchs to be 'graceful and well-made'. Young castrated slaves were raised in the women's quarters, supervised by an older eunuch. Their education prepared them for jobs specific to them. Some of the jobs were not considered masculine or, if done outside of the court, were jobs women did.

At court eunuchs acted as 'masters of ceremonies,' controlling access to the emperor; as doorkeepers; as servants in charge of traditionally female activities like cooking, serving and care of the wardrobe. Court eunuchs were also trained for tasks that aristocratic males traditionally avoided, such as bookkeeping, managing money and speculating in real estate. Certain positions at court were reserved specifically for eunuchs. They served as go-betweens in transactions between men and women of the court

and between the court and the outside world. They acted as trusted secretaries. They served as singers at court. They were very much involved in marital transactions and prepared the dead for burial. They regularly [appeared as] barbers, bloodletters and doctors.⁴

Palace eunuchs advanced from being tenth-century guardians of the harem to 'trusted political advisers and powerful administrators'. Even when women sat on the throne, they remained loyal. Some court eunuchs held important positions in the military receiving great fame. Unlike others in the royal palace, eunuchs were no threat to the emperor or empress because of their gendered status.

The most famous of these, of course, was Narses, Justinian's great general. Procopius believed that the removal of the testicles destroyed the seat of a man's natural powers, yet he was lavish in his praise of Narses. He marvelled that a eunuch raised in the women's quarters and accustomed to a soft life could overcome his inherent traits and command so successfully. Agathias chuckles at the naïveté of the Goths, who assumed that Narses was just a feeble caricature of a man who had set his masculinity aside and thus, were unprepared for his military prowess. Both of these authors stress the intelligence and skill of Narses, citing his planning and execution of a large operation.⁵

Eunuchs played an important role in the Byzantine world (AD 324–1453) that preceded the Ottomans. In AD 338, following the death of Constantine the Great, his three sons Constantius, Constantine and Constans arranged how to divide the empire. The resulting struggle saw Constantine and Constans killed and Constantius became the ruler of the Roman Empire with Constantinople as its capital. Constantius was paranoid about a coup d'état and wives and eunuchs, probably to curry favours from the emperor, may have exacerbated the situation by supporting his fantasies. Eunuchs not only encouraged the emperor but also received lofty positions because of their loyalty.

[M]any of them rose to leading positions in the civil, military and religious hierarchies, several becoming patriarch and one becoming *magister militum*, the commander-in-chief of the

army. One post that was almost invariably held by a eunuch was that of *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, or grand chamberlain. During the reign of Constantius this post was held by the eunuch Eusebius, who exerted great influence on the emperor, poisoning his mind against the young captive princes Gallus and Julian.⁶

Gallus and Julian were sons of Constantine's half-brother. Constantius imprisoned them for almost 14 years and then made Gallus the rank of Caesar and commander of an army. Eusebius convinced Constantius that Gallus was attempting to overthrow him and had his nephew arrested and beheaded under Eusebius' control. Constantius named Julian, Gallus' brother, as Caesar before his death in AD 361. His troops proclaimed Julian emperor and they traveled to Constantinople, arriving almost a month later in December. He was able to revenge his brother's death as one of his first acts as emperor was to try and then execute the eunuch Eusebius. Eusebius poisoned his uncle's mind against him. Julian also dismissed all of the other eunuchs in the imperial service as well as the needless servants who Constantius had hired. As Libanius wrote of those that Julian purged, 'There were a thousand cooks, as many barbers, and even more butlers. There were swarms of lackeys, the eunuchs were more in number than flies around the flocks in spring, and a multitude of drones of every sort.'⁷

A eunuch was responsible for breaking up the marriage plans of an emperor. After the death of Theodosius I, his two sons split the empire; Arcadius got the East and Honorius, the West. Theodosius wisely provided for his succession by appointing advisors because Arcadius was 18 and Honorius was ten. Honorius' advisor was Stilicho, commander-in-chief of the army in Italy. He arranged to have Honorius marry his daughter, Maria, in 398. At the same time, Rufinus, the advisor of Arcadius, wanted to increase his power and assure that a child of his family would become the wife of the emperor. However, it was the eunuch and grand chamberlain Eutropius who would have his way in the latter situation.

To maintain his control over the emperor, Eutropius wanted Arcadius to marry a woman he selected. He knew that if the emperor were pleased with the bride he chose, his power and prestige would rise. Rufinus visited Antioch and, while he was gone, Eutropius

showed Arcadius a portrait of a beautiful girl named Eudoxia from an aristocratic family of Constantinople. Arcadius fell in love with the woman in the portrait and by the time Rufinus returned to the city, the marriage preparations had already been made. They were married 'on 27 April 395, just three months after he became emperor of the East. During the remaining nine years of her short life Eudoxia bore him four daughters and a son, the future Theodosius II, who was born in Constantinople on 10 April 401'.⁸

As in many situations, the best plans do go awry. For all of his planning, Eutropius was executed in AD 399. Eudoxia so expanded her power that in AD 400, she had her husband crown her Augusta, an imperial title. She also had several lovers and many did not believe that her children were her husband's.

Eunuchs were very evident in the Byzantine Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople, for instance, was equivalent to the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Patriarchs who were eunuchs included Germanus I (715–730), Nicetas I (766–780), Methodius I (843–847), Ignatios (847–858), Stephanos II (925–928), Theophylaktos (933–956), Polyeuktos (956–970), Constantine III Leichudes (1059–1063) and Eustratios Gardias (1081–1084). Below the station of Patriarch were bishops, priests, monks and deacons. Many of them were also eunuchs, even though it was against church rules.⁹

The Byzantine Church made several decisions regarding castration, beginning with the First Ecumenical Council, called in AD 325. It ruled that the Church could not appoint eunuchs as clerics, 'unless they had been castrated for reasons such as an act of God or their health'. Excommunication was the punishment for physicians who unlawfully engaged in castration. Even so, 'the church never gave official permission, even on health grounds, because it had not wished to undertake the responsibility for such a dangerous operation which was frequently complicated by haemorrhage'. Still, nonprofessionals and physicians carried out castrations in spite of the laws, evidenced by the large number of eunuchs.¹⁰

Throughout the history of Byzantium eunuchs occupied places at all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. They were monks, priests, bishops and church officials. Churchmen reflected secular society in their ambivalence about eunuchs, but they focused on different

issues. Rather than a preoccupation with the male ideal and procreation as points of reference, clerical discussion of eunuchs tended to focus on their relationship to the ideal of celibacy. Because of their physical castration, eunuchs in the Church were assumed to be celibate. Yet ecclesiastical sources frequently suggest that, in the struggle for ascetic virtue, eunuchs had 'cheated' and were not able to attain fully the celibate ideal. That is, celibacy was too easy for them because they did not have to struggle to attain it. Rather, they had achieved celibacy through the outside intervention of castration.¹¹

One of the sources on castration in the Byzantine era is the writings of physician Paul of Aegina. His seventh century work, contained in seven volumes, not only speaks to castration but also to the philosophies behind the practice. He was certain that castration was unnatural, but might be necessary for 'acts of God' or health reasons, where physicians were obligated to operate. He also described castration procedures in detail.

The castration [...] takes place in two ways: the first is crushing and the second is the excision of the testicles. In the case of crushing, the youngest infants are put in a sitting position on a container of hot water to relax their body. In the container the testicles are crushed with the fingers until they have dissolved and disappeared and are no longer tangible. In the case of excision, the candidate for castration is placed on a platform, with the fingers of the left hand the scrotum with its contents (the testicles) is pulled and when it is at its maximum tension, two vertical incisions, one at each testicle, are made with a lancet (smili in Greek). When the testicles pop out from the incisions, they are exposed from their sheaths and removed leaving only the vascular pedicle. The writer prefers the latter of these two techniques since castration by crushing sometimes leaves an appetite for intercourse because, as it appears, some areas of the testicles escape the crushing process.¹²

Paul of Aegina noted that castration and self-castration were manifest in Byzantine times. Eunuchs could hold a vast amount of power, in some cases even more than the emperor did. They could rise in the military to

be generals. They could not become emperors, however, since ‘they did not possess the required prerequisite of “perfection of the body”’, a necessity for ascension to the throne. Yet, castration was not legal in Byzantine times.

Certainly the operation was forbidden by the official law, and carrying it out constituted a ground for punishment of the physician by the legislation of Byzantium. Justinian (527–565 AD) forbade castration by his Novella 142 and all subsequent legislation provided for punishment of a physician in the same manner (namely castration of the surgeon himself) or his decapitation by sword or being thrown to wild beasts. Castration was permitted only in the case of an incurable condition of the testicles which was certified by a physician and had to be carried out only by a surgeon.¹³

Still, some Byzantines castrated their sons, educated them and sent them to Constantinople for high-paying careers. A few of those eunuchs were able to help family members attain high stations in the empire. John the Orphanotrophos, for instance, directed both his brother and a nephew to the Byzantine throne as Michael IV (1034–1041) and Michael V (1041–1042).¹⁴ In both the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires (the latter copying the use of eunuchs from the former) the evidence clearly shows that eunuchs could be as competent as any other administrator or bureaucrat.

To the exarch Narses – the victorious general of Justinian, and companion in arms of Belisarius – correspond a thousand years later to ‘Suleiman the Eunuch,’ one of the Sultan’s most successful captains and the fifth of his Grand Viziers, and Ali Paşa, the Albanian, who won fame on many battlefields in his master’s day and was appointed to the chief command in Hungary in 1556.¹⁵

The position of the Chief Black Eunuch was similar to that of the *archieunuchos*, the chief of the eunuchs of the Byzantine palace. Historians have traced the trade in male slaves back to the Byzantines. However, the practice of using eunuchs in imperial palaces was a Muslim tradition as well. Eunuchs played important roles from the time of the Abbasids

(AD 750) and seemed connected to the harem system. Abbasid palaces had many White and Black eunuchs who sometimes wielded exceptional power. The practice of using eunuchs continued through the Ottoman Empire. Though the use of eunuchs had origins in the Byzantine Empire, it was grounded in Muslim history as well.

At the time of the Mamluk [one owned by another, bondsman] sultans in Egypt, the chief eunuch in the palace was given the title *zamamdar*. He was in charge of matters related to the sultan's harem and to his family affairs. He obtained anything that needed to be brought in from the outside. He took orders directly from the sultan with regard to the marriage of princesses from the ruler's family and the marriage of emancipated slave girls. All the eunuchs who served at the *bab al-sitara*, that is, at the 'curtain door,' (the women's quarters), were under his authority.¹⁶

Eunuchs were very numerous in the Byzantine Empire to the extent that they were compared to swarms of bees or flies. Many of the emperors considered them among the most valuable of gifts. They had their own order, presided over government offices and had high positions in the army and the Church. There were attempts to outlaw the practice, such as that of Justinian I (527–565), but it made little difference. Empress Eirene (797–802) was one who had a 'swarm of eunuchs' around her, one who became governor of Sicily. Michael V (1041–1042) made eunuchs of his relatives and his bodyguards were eunuchs as well. Although there were also many that disliked them, the eunuchs still were able to wield power. Some Byzantines repeated, 'If you have a eunuch, kill him; if you do not have one, buy one and kill him.' Constantine Manasses, a poet of the twelfth century, stated his displeasure with the following statement that appears to contain the typical stereotypes.

How long will power remain in the hands of eunuchs, with effeminate minds, perverse by natural propensity, liable to think up all sorts of misfortunes and carry them out, being of lustful minds, instruments of turpitude, guides in illicit acts and receptacles of vices.¹⁷

CHAPTER 3

EUNUCHS AND THE MUSLIM SLAVE TRADE

The Manufacture of Eunuchs

Abu Mansur al-Tha'alibi once cited a quote about the eunuchs of Muslims. Demonstrating the prohibition against Muslims to castrate but at the same time stating that eunuchs were not able to have children, the expression declared, 'No Muslim had ever given birth to him. Neither did he ever give birth to a Muslim.' As David Ayalon also concluded from that adage, it expressed 'eunuchs' isolation in Muslim society'.¹

According to Ayalon in his outstanding article, 'On the Eunuchs in Islam', the eunuch institution under Islam became distinct from that seen in other civilisations, although there were similarities. The harem system and the fact that the eunuch institution was part of a larger institution of slavery were two factors that greatly contributed to the development of special characteristics. He postulated that slavery and concubinage, plus the seclusion of Muslim women, 'created ideal conditions for the introduction of eunuchs in very great numbers into Muslim society, and especially into the courts of the rulers and the homes of the well-to-do individuals'. Those latter individuals could be members of the military or could be civilians.

The major advantage that eunuchs had over unemasculated servants and slaves was that eunuchs could move about in almost any area of a home or building. Therefore, the more eunuchs a person owned compared to non-eunuchs, the greater was the freedom of movement for

the women as well. When the numbers of women increased in the court, the number of eunuchs also increased. Soon, 'the eunuchs became an indispensable and most conspicuous element in the palatial court and the stately home'.

Eunuchs had direct access to the master of the house or the ruler at almost any time. The master's living area was connected to the harem by at least one entrance and, except for the master, only the eunuchs and the women had access to it. The master denied access to his own sons after they reached a certain age, but the eunuchs had no age restriction. As Ayalon pointed out, that close relationship between master and eunuch was bound to build a special liaison between the two. With access to the master flowing through the eunuchs, many eunuchs saw this as an opportunity to amass power.² One can begin to understand from the above basic description of how, very slowly at first, the Chief Black Eunuch was able to wrest power and retain it.

Under Islam, almost all of the eunuchs were slaves, a condition that also made an impact on the development of that institution. In contrast, in other civilisations, eunuchs were not necessarily slaves and many of them were from within their empires. Sometimes they had family and friends in the area, plus they maintained historical and cultural traditions. The Muslim eunuchs, on the other hand, came from foreign territories and almost never had any family that they could contact. Their isolation made them very dependent upon their owners, who were the only people to which they felt any loyalty. Further, other slaves under Islam could start families and could have divided loyalties while the eunuchs could not. They were not able to initiate families that might rival the family of the ruler.

Organisational behaviour can also explain the symbiotic relationship between the Chief Black Eunuchs and the sultans, since those relationships took on familial aspects. Unlike other family structures, the sultans did not have to worry about family members of the eunuchs jeopardizing their obligations and generating disruptive distractions.

[T]he lives of most people will be centred around what they regard to be their families, a proposition repeatedly substantiated by ordinary observation. This means that the welfare of recognized kin will usually be of much greater concern to the individuals than the welfare of others, with the greatest satisfaction in life flowing

from acting in ways which normally serve to enhance the family's prospects for survival and growth.³

There were additional factors that further contributed to the eunuch institution developing differently than other systems. The eunuchs under Islam, and even those in other empires, could be the objects of contempt and ridicule. In the master's home, however, he was a person of position under the master's protection. That also helped to forge a close relationship between the two. Finally, Muslims had eunuchs from a variety of ethnic and racial groups from Europe, Africa and Asia Minor. That fact differentiated them from other slaves as well. Generally, racial discrimination among Black and White eunuchs did not seem to manifest itself as much as it did between Black and White unemasculated slaves. Among the latter group, Black slaves would be at the bottom of the social ladder. Black and White eunuchs might form separate bodies and White eunuchs may have had it better during certain places and periods. Yet, Black eunuchs would still rise in the military and in administration, even attaining the highest positions. When Blacks did achieve high positions, they were usually eunuchs.⁴

As Ayalon also pointed out, there were also some potential dangers in the master/eunuch relationship. No one was in a better strategic position to dispose of the master as was the eunuch. In the Ottoman Empire, there were instances that eunuchs were involved in deposing a sultan. However, a family member was more likely to kill a ruler rather than a eunuch.⁵

Eunuchs were only one class of people that found themselves as slaves in the Muslim world. Islam began as a localized phenomenon on the Arabian Peninsula and in about a hundred years, had expanded from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus Valley. Most of Spain as well as North Africa and what is now the Middle East became Dar-al-Islam, the abode of peace or 'territories in which Islam and Islamic religious law prevail'. Before Islam, slavery and the trade in slaves were already established in the Arabian Peninsula and in other regions the Muslims conquered. A person could become a slave if purchased, captured through warfare or through birth.

When the Muslims defeated the Visigoth rulers on the Iberian Peninsula, they proceeded to establish Islam across Europe. It was their

defeat by the armies of Charles Martel (Charles the Hammer) at the battle of Tours-Poitier in AD 732 that halted them. The Muslims enslaved Christians in the cities that resisted; in addition, they brought their own slaves onto the Peninsula. However, if a city accepted the Muslims as rulers, those inhabitants could pay a head tax and keep their freedom and property. While Christians (and sometimes Jews) might have been second-class citizens, they were at least citizens of the Muslim state, possessing 'well-defined rights and obligations which found sanction not in the whim of the rulers or the temper of the times but in the Law of God itself'.

Initially, the status of the Mozárabes (Christians living under Muslim rule) was sharply reduced: they could not acquire Muslim slaves; and any of their existing slaves who converted to Islam were sold to Muslim masters, since no non-Muslim could hold a Muslim as a slave. By the ninth and tenth centuries, though, Mozárabes could purchase slaves who reached the peninsula through the slave trade.⁶

Slavs became the most populous slave group in tenth-century Spain, became known by the Arabic term of 'sakaliba'. Some of the Slavs entered Spain as eunuchs and, therefore, sakaliba referred to any eunuch as well. Besides the Slavs, there were also Byzantine Christians brought as slaves to Spain during the eleventh century as well as North African Berbers. Black people from sub-Saharan Africa began arriving in Spain as slaves also in the eleventh century but their numbers as captives began to decrease during the twelfth century.⁷

There were three special conditions that made the institution of eunuchism 'stronger and more essential' than in other societies. They were (1) the large numbers and seclusion of women in the courts and in Muslim society, (2) the character of the Muslim institution of slavery and (3) the extensive boundaries of Ottoman Empire. Muslims could have four wives and numerous concubines, whom the eunuchs guarded. They guarded the entire court or family compound, performing a variety of duties. In the court, the eunuchs performed both overt and covert missions for the rulers and participated in the upbringing of young members of court. Generally, White eunuchs seemed to be able to reach higher positions than their Black

counterparts, but Black eunuchs fared better than their non-eunuch Black counterparts.⁸

As far as black eunuchs were concerned, their chances of rising on the socio-military ladder, or around the person of the ruler and his harem, in the major centres of Islam, were incomparably better than those of the non-castrated blacks.⁹

Mohammed the Prophet of Allah (AD 570–632) forbade Muslims from making eunuchs of men. However, many ruling African Muslims did not heed that ban.¹⁰ To manoeuvre around it, the Ottomans had non-Muslims provide them with eunuchs. While many eunuchs were used to protect the harems, many others were civil servants. Eunuchs were not able to create a rival dynasty, so rulers used them to oversee military and civil affairs.

The best-known early source of eunuchs in Africa was in Ethiopia. Here, despite the efforts of the king of Amhara to forbid the practice, castration continued to be performed in the fourteenth century in the town of Washlu, the care of the survivors being the specialty of the Muslim principality of Hadya [...] Ethiopian eunuchs were already known in Arabia, for the servitors and doorkeepers of the mosque in Medina, all eunuchs, included Ethiopians.¹¹

Other areas in Africa that also were noted for castration centres were 'in the Mossi country, in Damagaram (Niger Republic), in Bornu (Northeast Nigeria), and, especially, Baghirmi (Chad Republic). Most of the eunuchs were made for harem work and the most famous harem of them all in the Near and Middle East was the one belonging to the Sultan at Constantinople'.¹²

Eunuchs were supposed to have certain traits that made them favourites as harem guards and servitors. Because of the Muslim prohibition against castration, traders brought them from Verdun, France, Samarkand, Bukhara and Christian communities in Egypt. Ethiopian eunuchs reached Egypt where Muslims bought them. The *Book of Animals* by the ninth century Muslim Jahiz explained the demand for eunuchs over other slaves. Prague also was a castration centre

for European eunuchs during the Middle Ages while the Caspian Sea city of Kharazon supplied ones for central Asia.

Another change which overcomes the eunuch: of two slaves of Slavic race, who are [...] twins, one castrated and the other not, the eunuch becomes more disposed toward service, wiser, more able, and apt for the various problems of manual labour, and you find him more lively in intelligence and conversation. All these qualities result only in the castrated one. On the other hand, his brother continues to have the same native torpor, the same lack of natural talent, the same imbecility common to slaves, and incapacity for learning a foreign language.¹³

Another use of male eunuchs, noted in nineteenth-century Morocco, was as concubines. That was 'a feature of Islamic society that affected the treatment of young male slaves, whether they were eunuchs or not'. One author blames that behaviour on the seclusion of women, which led to heterosexual frustration. Interestingly, he does not mention the theory that homosexuality might exist in all societies to some extent. He goes on to explain further:

The primacy, even glorification, of virile values influenced attitudes and conduct, most markedly in societies of militarised rule. In association with the courts of generals or emirs, Hodgson explains, 'sex between males entered pervasively into the ethic and aesthetic of upper classes [...] as in some classical Athenian circles, it was assumed that a handsome adolescent ('beardless') youth or even a younger boy was naturally attractive to any full-grown man, and that the man would have sexual relations with him if the occasion arose (for instance, if the youth were his slave), alongside sex relations with his women.' Many love lyrics, particularly in Persia, were conventionally and explicitly addressed by male poets to males.¹⁴

The Egyptian Copts, supposedly the first African Christians, sold eunuchs only to Muslims because of the latter's ban against the mutilation of God's creatures. Mutilation also included branding slaves and filing their teeth. The captured Africans, who were neither Christian

nor Muslim, 'did not fall within the scope of ecclesiastical law'. The Africans were 'the other' to both religions.¹⁵ The following adage, attributed to the Prophet, is the reason that Muslims eschewed conducting emasculation themselves:

Whoever kills a slave, him will we kill. Whoever cuts off the nose of a slave, his nose will we cut off; and whoever castrates a slave, him also shall we castrate.¹⁶

Travellers through the area who sometimes rationalized slavery usually held negative opinions about the emasculation of the African slaves. During his travels in 1737, Frederick Lewis Norden wrote about the practice of making eunuchs in Upper Egypt. Though he did not reveal who the practitioners were, it seems that they were probably Copts. Norden specifically designated the village of Denesle (about 100 miles north of al-Nazala). Therefore, it seems that from the eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth century, the Copts of Upper Egypt controlled the making of eunuchs. George Baldwin, a general consul to the Duke of Leeds, confirmed this in a 1789 report. Further, his information alleged that castration of slaves was a profession handed down from father to son. He did not believe that there were more than 20 eunuchs manufactured annually. Another late eighteenth-century traveller, W. G. Brown, wrote that in some families, making eunuchs was hereditary, reflecting Baldwin's viewpoint. Christian Coptic priests and monks, according to Hermann Ludwig von Pückler-Muskau, made a lot of money from their business.¹⁷ The numbers that became eunuchs is still not clear.

According to the mayor of the village, where the operations were performed (1798), one to two hundred eunuchs were made there annually. J. L. Burckhardt (1813) speaks about one hundred and fifty eunuchs made annually, though in 1812, 'Muhammad Ali caused two hundred young Darfur slaves to be mutilated, whom he sent as a present to the Grand Signor (the Sultan).' Henry Light (1814) saw 'two boats containing one hundred and fifty black boys on their way to Cairo, who had been totally emasculated,' and Clot Bey (1836) stated that three hundred eunuchs come annually from the hands of the castrators.¹⁸

Burckhardt was a Swiss Arabist who, between 1813 and 1814, traveled extensively in the Sudan and Upper Egypt. He recorded two castration centres, one at Zawiyat al-Dayr, a Coptic village near Asyut and another west of Darfur. The latter place, Burckhardt observed, was a less significant site than the former. Eunuchs from there went to Egypt or 'were sent as presents by the Negro sovereigns to the great mosques at Mekka and Medina, by way of Souakin (Suakin)'. The former site in Upper Egypt supplied 'all Europeans, and the greater part of Asiatic Turkey with these guardians of female virtue'.

Two Coptic monks operated the castration centre and the death rates were surprisingly low. Burckhardt reported that he knew of only two deaths among 60 youth that he investigated. Others told him that even that was a high rate for it usually stood at two out of 100. The monks turned out about 150 boys annually, but most Egyptians had contempt for their practice. However, the government protected them because of the annual taxes they paid. Moreover, profits to the owners of the newly made eunuchs were so much that they consented to a practice 'which many of them in their hearts abhor'.¹⁹

In the nineteenth century, 200 to 300 boys were castrated annually in Upper Egypt at the monastery of Dayr al-Jandala, just south of Abu Tig. Located on the caravan route between the Sudan and Egypt, Coptic priests performed the operation on boys between the ages of eight and ten years old. Despite their alleged skills, two out of three died. Hogendorn's price differential research indicates that rate to be correct. After the prohibition on such operations, Kordofan and Darfur supplied eunuchs.²⁰ Three physicians, Louis Frank, R. R. Madden and Clot Bey, plus Jean-Louis Burckhardt, Henry Light, Thomas Legh and G. Belzoni recorded the radical procedure as they witnessed it between 1798 and 1836 in Upper Egypt. Although there are similarities to other procedures, there are also significant differences.

The boy is held firmly on a table, and his body is being pressed down by some strong men. Then, the one who performs the operation squeezes tightly the testicles with silk bonds coated with soap, and while the boy is in a faint by reason of the pain, he cuts the genitalia off as quickly as possible with a razor. Dr Louis Frank added that the operator takes with one hand the scrotum and the penis, which he stretches out lightly, then with a razor in

his right hand, he cuts off all with a single stroke. Although very simple in itself, this operation requires a certain amount of dexterity and experience, for if the operator stretches the parts out too much and cuts them too close, the patient easily perishes. If, on the contrary, he does not stretch these parts out sufficiently, there results a kind of stump, which renders the eunuch deformed.²¹

Of course, those performing the operation had to ensure that the urethra remained open for if it closed, the patient would certainly die. To prevent that, the operators pushed a tube into the opening, allowing the patient to urinate.

Those in whom the penis is removed use a tube to assist micturition. This is probably for these reasons: 1. To convey the urine clear of the person and of the clothing; 2, to prevent the contraction of the cicatricial orifice, which, unless attended to, is in some patients prone to form a stricture. It is thought that eunuchs, like women, are less subject than men to the occurrence of stone in the bladder, and when old they are doubtless all free from senile hypertrophy of the prostate gland.²²

Three of the men related three differing accounts about stopping the bleeding, but all three could possibly be true. One method was to cauterise the wound with hot dust and sand, a second by spreading henna powder on it and a third method was placing mule dung on the wound. Dr Madden, however, learned that 'Arabs pretended to stop the haemorrhage by a charm' and also, the Copts used a secret herbal styptic. Henry Light wrote that a Franciscan monk who also practised medicine placed butter on newly castrated boys, which 'assisted nature in the cure'.

Almost all travellers to that area of Egypt reported the burial of the patients in sand, either to the waist, above the stomach or to the shoulders, where they were left for about 24 hours. Dr Madden reported seeing the patient 'thrown down on the hot sand, which is piled on a level with their backs, a mode of treatment, which supersedes the application of styptics as well as ligatures'. During the time they were buried two men massaged their spines, 'which they consider the principal seat of the circulation'. Dr Bey said that when they took the

boys from the sand, their wounds were dressed with an ointment made of clay and oil. Burckhardt said that the Copts treated the wound with a type of plaster. Dr Madden reported that after removal from the sand, the patients were fed bread and water for fifteen days.²³

[T]he operations were normally performed in the autumn of each year, because this season was regarded as most favourable. Madden was told by the Copts that in the summer season the slaves were usually sent to Asyût. This fact explains why the majority of the European travelers who sailed to Upper Egypt and passed Asyût did not comment on this practice, since it was customary for Europeans to travel to Upper Egypt in the winter months or preferably even in the spring.²⁴

French adventurer Raoul Du Bisson led an expedition to Abyssinia in 1863 and reported on the making of eunuchs in his work, *The Women, the Eunuchs, and the Warriors of the Soudan*. He stated that the Sudan alone furnished 3,800 eunuchs annually, with the boys gathered from Abyssinia and nearby countries through war, purchase or kidnapping. The government was also involved because each candidate cost two dollars in customs fees taken into the country. In Khartoum, 'pharmacists, apothecaries, and others engaged in the manufacture of eunuchs' purchased them and performed the simple castration (not the emasculation). The death rate was about a third and the newly castrated eunuchs sold for \$200.

According to Du Bisson, there was a 'great eunuch factory' on Mount Ghebel-Eter at Abou-Gerghè run by Coptic monks. It was a monastery, a 'large, square structure, resembling an ancient fortress; on the ground-floor the operating-room is situated, with all the appliances required to perform these horrible operations'. They furnished 'Constantinople, Arabia, and Asia Minor with many of their complete, much-sought-for, and expensive eunuchs'. The monks produced both the simple castrated eunuchs 'and those on whom complete ablation of all organs has been performed', the latter selling for \$750 to \$1,000 because of the 90 per cent mortality rate. Du Bisson estimated that it took 35,000 African youth for the Sudan to achieve its annual quota of 3,800 eunuchs.²⁵ Du Bisson left even a more graphic account of the operation.

The little, helpless, and unfortunate prisoner or slave is stretched out on an operating table; his neck is made fast in a collar fastened to the table, and his legs spread apart and the ankles made fast to iron rings; his arms are each held by an assistant. The operator then seizes the little penis and scrotum and with one sweep of a sharp razor removes all the appendages. The resulting wound necessarily bares the pubic bones and leaves a large, gaping sore that does not heal kindly. A short bamboo cannula or catheter is then introduced into the urethra, from which it is allowed to project for about two inches, and no attention is paid to any arterial hæmorrhage; the whole wound is simply plastered up with some hæmostatic compound and the little victim is then buried in warm sand up to his neck, being exposed to the hot, scorching rays of the sun; the sand and soil is tightly packed about his little body so as to prevent any possibility of any movement on the part of the child, perfect immobility being considered by the monks as the main element required to promote a successful result.²⁶

Seeing what he considered 'useless barbarity', Du Bisson believed that 'Christian nations' should band together to 'interfere in this horrible traffic'. He also revealed an additional operation, that of cutting off the tongue to create mute eunuchs. The reason was that 'mute or dumb eunuchs are less apt to enter into intrigues, and are therefore higher prized', meaning that they would sell for even more money.

One researcher has found limited evidence that court mutes and dwarfs were probably eunuchs who worked in both the male and female areas of the palace. Plus, there were female dwarfs and mutes and at least one dwarf concubine. There is a record of Black mutes who, along with White mutes, led important persons into the presence of Sultan Mahmud II in the early 1800s and of a Black dwarf in Abdülhamid II's court in the late nineteenth century. Zeyrek Aga, a dwarf eunuch of the late sixteenth century in the court of Murad III, was painted in a miniature.²⁷

Eunuchs in Service

Dr R. R. Madden made a plea to Greek-born Muhammad Ali, paşa (viceroy) and founder of modern Egypt, whom he had met about

1826, requesting that he stop the practice of eunuchism. He had an audience with the ruler at which time he carried a message from the Anti-slavery Convention of London and in the follow-up letter, commented on what he called 'the most barbarous' practice. He accused Muhammad Ali of tolerating and encouraging 'the cruel, sanguinary, and most atrocious practice of mutilating men for the purpose of enhancing their value in the market, and, to the disgrace of Egypt, this country still continues to be the only part of the Ottoman empire where it exists'.²⁸

W. Cornwallis Harris, visiting Ethiopia in the nineteenth century, noted that many of the king's servants were eunuchs. Some supervised women, while one supervised the town upon the king's absence. The court mourned the death of the chief eunuch, conveying the similar type of respect the chief eunuch received under the Ottomans.²⁹

Another source of eunuchs was Nupe. The rulers of Nupe and Kano exchanged ten horses for 12 eunuchs in the fifteenth century. They exported horses, kola nuts, eunuchs and later, guns. In both Nupe and Kano, eunuchs played a vital role.

The institutions of mass slavery and of eunuchs both flourished in Kano. The first to appoint eunuchs as important state officials there was Muhammad Rimfa, in the latter fifteenth century. In the time of Abudakr Kado, who in the later sixteenth century concentrated exclusively on religious duties, both eunuchs and clerics became very numerous in Kano. Early in the seventeenth century, Wombai Giwa, presumably a eunuch, became so powerful and likely to revolt that he had to be dismissed from office. Kutumbi, ruler of Kano in the second quarter of the seventh century, was always attended by 100 eunuchs, handsomely dressed and with gold and silver ornaments.³⁰

Leo Africanus, known also as Leo the African, described the geography of West Africa that was familiar to him. He wrote his descriptions for Pope Leo X, whose year of accession was 1513. According to Leo Africanus, in the famous kingdom of Songhai eunuchs held key positions in the civil service. He further reported that Askia Muhammad I, the Muslim king, killed the Hausa king of Gobir. However, Askia Muhammad spared the lives of the grandsons

but made them eunuchs, assuring that the former royal lineage could not continue.

Askia Muhammad I was famous for his hajj in 1497. His appointment of Caliph (Commander of the Faithful) of Western Sudan 'gave him claim to the allegiance of all Muslims west to the Atlantic and established a united front against Christians and others'. He had such an extensive wardrobe that one eunuch was assigned to its care. Toward the end of his life when the king was going blind, it was the chief palace eunuch, Ali Follow, who acted as a regent. Overthrown by his son Musa in 1528, the reign of Askia Muhammad I ended and Songhai never attained the former level of greatness.³¹

African rulers, many of them Muslims, sometimes made gifts or tribute of eunuchs. The rulers of the kingdom of Wadai sometimes presented eunuchs to the rulers of Constantinople, another example of the trade before the Ottoman Empire but also one that lasted through the 1900s. They also shipped eunuchs to Mecca and Medina to guard holy places. In the year 1184, a traveller noted a group of eunuchs who guarded the Mosque of the Prophet. Ibn Jubayr wrote the following description of, at that time, both Black and White eunuchs.

On the eastern side [of the tomb] is an arbor of aloe wood. This is the place where some of the guardians who watch over the blessed mosque spend the night. The guardians are Ethiopian and Slavic eunuchs. They present an elegant appearance and are meticulous in their clothing and bearing.³²

Ibn Jubayr had observed what began in the twelfth century as a sacred society of eunuchs chosen to guard holy tombs. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries they became 'guardians of sanctity' at tombs in 'Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Hebron', leading to them to become both wealthy and very powerful. Supposedly, those societies were still in existence at the end of the twentieth century 'and are still associated with the sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina'.³³

The famous Moroccan chronicler and traveller Ibn Battuta (Muhammad ibn Abdullah Ibn Battuta, 1304–1377) wrote a description of the eunuchs in the mid-fourteenth century. He reported

that Borno was famous for exports of 'excellent slave girls, eunuchs (*fityan*), and saffron-dyed fabrics'. Like Ibn Jubayr, he commented on the handsomeness of the eunuchs. However, he also wrote about their power and wealth, adding depth to the eunuchs. Ibn Battuta did not mention White eunuchs in his travel accounts as he attempted to visit every country in the Islamic world.

The servitors of this noble mosque and its custodians are eunuchs from among the Ethiopians and such like. They present a handsome appearance, they have a clean, meticulous look, and their clothes are elegant. Their chief is known as the *shaykh al-khuddam*, and he has the position of one of the grand amirs. They have stipends in the lands of Egypt and Syria which are brought to them every year.³⁴

Johann Wild, a captured German Christian soldier who converted to Islam, visited the Tomb of the Prophet in 1607. Although he puzzled over how castrated Africans could have such high stations, his descriptions of the eunuchs seem relatively unbiased. Wild focused on their roles as guardians.

There are about five or six of these castrate ones in this church [the Prophet's mosque], where they guard the grave of Mahomet. They lie night and day within and do nothing except sing, pray, read, and watch over the donations to the church. They are considered to be holy people, and I was told that they go for three days at a time without even eating a morsel of bread.³⁵

Heinrich Barth, nineteenth century author of the five-volume work *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa*, noted that phenomenon as well.

Barth met an envoy from Medina in Messene, who had come to ask for eunuchs to guard the Prophet's tomb [...]. Another old Bagirmian eunuch, after many years of service in charge, he said, of the Zam-Zam well, returned from Mecca in the later years of the nineteenth century to end his days peacefully in Abukir.³⁶

Eldon Rutter described his late-nineteenth-century trip to Mecca and the 50 'African Negroes' in the Matâf (area of circumambulation). He noted that people know them as Aghas who wear a special outfit consisting of 'a jubba of any colour, with very long loose sleeves which hang down to the wearers' knees, completely concealing his hands'. He further noted the large turbans, the broad sashes that ended below the knees. They each 'carry a staff and some are always at the Matâf and while on duty there, wear a white jubba'. One of their jobs was to keep that area meticulously clean.

Upon the smallest piece of dirt making its appearance on the marble pavement, two of them quickly take up a large metal jug of water, a metal bowl, a broom, a shovel, a pair of iron tongs, and a sponge, and proceed at once to remove the pollution. If this be a piece of solid matter – mud, gravel, paper, or similar object – one of the Aghas picks it up with the iron tongs, and drops it into the metal bowl. Then, one of them taking the broom, and the other the shovel, they sweep up any remaining particles. This accomplished, they pour water on the spot where the dirt has lain, and clean it thoroughly with the aid of the sponge. Almost constantly several of these eunuchs are to be seen sweeping the Matâf with long-fibred flapping brooms.³⁷

Rutter also revealed that the eunuchs derived their income from the awqaf and lived in the expensive quarter of El Hajla. They supposedly spent a large portion of their money on their wives and slave girls besides their male attendants. It appeared that there was a group of young boys who lived together in one house. They were presumably eunuchs as well because the older eunuchs were instructing them 'in religious matters and in their proper duties'.³⁸

Muslim convert Lady Evelyn Cobbold visited Medina in 1934 as a guest of the Saudi government. She wrote that she saw 30 eunuchs at the Mosque and predicted that within a few years there would be no more. Emel Esin described an elderly eunuch in Medina who wore 'a long-sleeved coat and voluminous turban of the eighteenth-century Ottoman Court'. He had 'emaciated hands', a 'vacant expression', a 'sweet smile' and was 'mumbling incomprehensibly'. During the 1970s, a professor who traveled to Medina after Mecca witnessed an old eunuch beating a pilgrim

with a staff for a perceived slight against The Prophet. The Saudi magazine *al-Yamama* ran an article that stated there were 14 eunuchs still serving at Mecca and 17 at Medina. Mentioning the supposed wealth of the eunuchs, the interviewee said, 'God has deprived them of sensual pleasure in the world but he has enriched them with material possessions and, before that, with the honour of serving the Sacred House.' The writer did not interview any of the eunuchs, so their views are absent. Today, eunuchs might still be engaged in guarding the Holy Places, but their roles would have changed from earlier times.

Whatever their increase in material wealth, their symbolic wealth has been greatly diminished. They no longer define and mediate multiple boundaries in a moral and political landscape which includes both the living and the dead. Their modern representation narrowly defines their role as that of sexual police – neutered guardians of morality. As for the eunuchs themselves, they continue to maintain their dignified silence.³⁹

Eunuchs also had duties at the holy mosques (places of prostration) in Mecca and Medina that went beyond guard duty. Sometimes women in the women's areas engaged in squabbles and someone needed to quiet them or even eject them. No man could touch a woman who was not his wife or close relative and therefore, could not enter the fray. Because Muslims did not categorize eunuchs as men, they could use physical strength if required.⁴⁰

Despite the fact that the Prophet Mohammed told his followers not to make eunuchs of themselves or their followers, several hundred of them were in the mosques of the Holy Cities. The reason was probably that the mosque attendants were required to make contact with women who were visitors.⁴¹

Emasculation was not only a painful process, but also a deadly one. Although halted in recent times for the most part, the practice is still ongoing. As one writer noted during the 1960s, Middle Eastern boys between the ages of seven and ten years old are still subject to that procedure 'very much as it was at the turn of the century when small boys, torn from their families, were dragged across the hot Sahara to the present site of the Aswan dam and there castrated'.⁴²

CHAPTER 4

SLAVERY AND THE OTTOMANS

The enslavement of Africans had been a topic of Muslim legal opinion at least from the sixteenth century. There was argument that focused on ‘the relationship between blackness of skin and slavery’ that reveal a debate between attitudes and Holy Law. Ottoman slavery seemed to have incorporated some of the same arguments and concerns. Overall, the following seemed to summarize but not necessarily settle the question of slavery, particularly the enslavement of Africans.

Slavery, then, is a consequence of, and an affliction brought on by, being beyond the pale of Islam. It is the will of God that some folk should be Muslims and others not, and those who are Muslims should be aware that the situation might have been reversed. While this is a worthy admonition to Muslims to be considerate towards their slaves, it also legitimizes slavery inasmuch as it acknowledges Muslims’ right to enslave non-Muslims, and, indeed, intimates that God in His wisdom created a situation in which some might be slaves of others, for had He so willed, He might have reversed the roles.¹

In his book *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman East*, Ehud R. Toledano observed, ‘In light of the new wave of works on slavery in many societies across the globe, the study of Ottoman slavery appeared even more neglected and external to the highly articulated discourse on slavery.’ He further states that in Islamic societies, the subject of slavery is very sensitive. The self-censorship in research, according to Toledano,

'has severely restricted the scholarly discussion of topics that are somehow viewed as potentially unflattering to the image of Muslims, especially those living in the Middle East'.² Perhaps that could account for the numbers of stories and artworks that paint a somewhat romantic view of Ottoman slavery.

Slaves for the Empire came from three major areas – the Eurasian steppe, Europe and Africa. Occasionally there were slaves sent from India and China, but they seemed comparatively few in number. At first, Africans came mostly from south of the Sahara Desert, where the Muslim world knew of them from the earliest times. It was only since the advance of Muslim armies into Africa that they became more common. Then they came from East Africa by sea, from the Sudan by caravan and from West Africa across the Sahara to the Mediterranean areas from Morocco the Egypt. Although the Ottomans used slaves in agricultural, industrial and commercial areas, they primarily worked in domestic settings.³

People of Turkish origin have been in varying degrees of contact with African people since at least the ninth century. Initial contacts between the two groups probably took place in Iraq where Turks in the 'Abbasid military encountered many East Africans. Subsequently, members of the two groups served in various armies, in labour gangs and as concubines and house servants. The expansion of Ottoman Turkey in the sixteenth century brought Turks into contact with a number of African peoples and their descendants, not only in the Middle East but also in northern, western and eastern Africa.⁴

Esma Durugönül conjectured that, specifically for Africans, Turkey lacks an African consciousness that one might find in the United States or South America. Therefore, 'there is no community that demands the investigation of their past in order to be able to come to terms with it'.

Besides, both in the Ottoman era as well as the Republican era, Africans have been considered as Turks/Muslims. As a consequence, Afro-Turks are virtually statistically nonexistent in the official demographic records of the Ottoman and Republican eras of Turkish history.⁵

Another historian, Umut Uzer, postulated that racism was rare in Turkey because Islam was 'a significant component of Turkish national identity'. That element was related more to Turkish national identity

rather than religiosity, for 'when a Turk defines his identity, ethnic Turkishness is complemented with Islam; the two are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing for many people'.⁶

All Turkish citizens were deemed Turks and Muslims as well. On a social level, then, all Turkish Muslims were brothers and sisters. Further, those who were not Muslim were in the minority, for even slaves who were brought to the Ottoman Empire as children became converts to Islam. Although one can see this emergence of national Turkish identity much more clearly after the founding of the Turkish Republic in the twentieth century, it began under the Ottoman Empire.⁷ Racism, then, seemed to have been directed primarily against those who were not Muslim and those who were not Turks as well. Missing elements from those conversations, however, are the voices of the non-Turks, particularly the Africans.

On a wider note, the African diaspora was well established by the end of the eighteenth century, with many Africans having been forcefully removed from their nations of origin. The trans-Saharan slave routes were instituted by that time, providing Africans to the Islamic world, which absorbed them first as slaves, mostly domestics. The children were also eventually absorbed into Muslim communities. In spite of the characterisation of them being ugly, many African women were desired as concubines because of their beauty and 'as concubines donated African genes to the local human stock'. Though there might not have been much African culture passed on by the Africans, there was certainly a darkening of skin in Middle Eastern regions, including Turkey.⁸

At its peak, the Ottoman Empire stretched across three continents, from North Africa to southwestern Europe (the gates of Vienna) to Iraq in western Asia. In the span of approximately 700 years, it rose from a small regional authority to a world power and constricted to a modern republic on Asia Minor. By the 1890s, Turkey only consisted of 63,850 square miles and 4,700,000 people in Europe and 729,380 square miles and 16,174,000 people in Asia on the western part of the Ottoman Empire.⁹ The Empire itself, however, still consisted of possessions in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Compared with Turkey in Europe, the Asiatic possessions of the Ottoman Empire occupy nearly seven times the area of the former, with more than double the population. These provinces, or

vilayets, directly controlled by the Porte, comprise the geographically distinct regions of the Anatolian plateau (Asia Minor), the Armenian and Kurdish highlands, the Mesopotamian lowlands, the hilly and partly mountainous country of Syria and Palestine, and the coastlands of West and Northeast Arabia. The changes occasioned by the Russo–Turkish war of 1878 were the cession to Persia of a small district on the eastern frontier, and to Russia of Kars and Batoum [Batumi] on the northwest, to England being assured the military occupation of Cyprus.¹⁰

The 1878 Congress of Berlin also reduced the European portion of the Ottoman Empire of the 1890s. That decline prompted Russian diplomat and statesman, Prince Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Gorchakov, to label Turkey ‘the sick man of the East’. Turkey waived all claim to sovereignty over Bulgaria, Eastern Roumelia (Rumelia), and Thessaly. Rumania, Serbia and Montenegro acquired their independence while Bosnia and Herzegovina were committed to the administration of Austria-Hungary, and the island of Cyprus was ceded to England. All that remained, then, of Turkish domination in Europe was little more than 60,000 square miles, comprising the provinces of Albania (Arnavutluk), Monastir (Bitola), and Salonika (Thessaloniki), the latter containing within its limits the seat of Ottoman government, Constantinople.¹¹

The Ottomans themselves were the official ruling and military classes and could be Turks, Arabs, Jews, Slavs or others. Ottomans were urban ruling elites, ‘a Muslim in the service of the sultan who from Istanbul ruled over a vast polyglot empire composed of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, of Turks, Arabs, Armenians [second most important non-Muslim population], Albanians, and Kurds [Indo-European Muslim ethnic group], Bosnians, Greeks [most important non-Muslim group] and a host of other populations’.

To understand slavery under the Ottoman Empire (1288–1918) is to understand their perception of power. For centuries, the Ottoman sultans (emperors) were absolute rulers, represented by the Grand Viziers (Sadrazamlar), who were also the military commanders. The Şeykh ul-islam (Şeyhülislâm), who headed the ulema, was the highest-ranked representative of Islam within the Ottoman Empire. Islamic law governed divine reason while the sultan had the authority ‘of issuing

regulations and laws outside the religious law'. In the minds of many in the empire, the sultan was 'the shadow of God on earth, the repository of justice, and the source of all material wellbeing'.

The Ottoman state, an offspring of the Seljukid empire, appears to have gone farther than any previous Islamic state in asserting the independence of state affairs and public law vis-à-vis the religious law. Mehmed the Conqueror (1444–1446, 1451–1481), the true founder of the Ottoman Empire and promoter of a centralised and absolutist imperial system, further strengthened the principle of the ruler's legislative authority. Apparently, he was the first ruler in Islamic history to promulgate codes of law based exclusively on sultanic authority.¹²

The sultans believed that to have power, they had to have soldiers. To afford soldiers, they had to have money to pay them. Unless the subjects were happy, healthy and prosperous, they could not pay the sultans' taxes. There also had to be some form of justice to keep the subjects happy, healthy and prosperous. That was the formula for practical leadership.¹³ Ottoman rule had four functional institutional areas. The sultan himself headed the *mülkiye* (imperial civil service), which provided the leadership. The *seyfîye* (military-administrative establishment) oversaw defence and security. The *kalemiye* (administrative/bureaucratic institution) was the *Hazine-i Amire* (State Treasury) that collected and expanded revenues. The *ilmiye* (religious/cultural institution) included the *ulema* (religious-judicial hierarchy of Muslim theologians and scholars) that organized and propagated the faith, plus interpreted and enforced religious law.¹⁴

The model for administrating the Ottoman Empire was the palace household because, according to them, it contained all of the elements necessary to govern an empire. Household members trained in household and, after achieving a high level of proficiency, could gain administrative positions within the palace or the provinces as military or administrative officials. There they would form their own households patterned after that of the sultan's. The sultan's household might incorporate thousands of individuals while the administrators might have a few hundred to a thousand. Among household members would be slaves, relatives of the administrator, soldiers, domestics, artisans, and

many others. The Black eunuchs were able to gain important positions within the sultan's household and, in some cases, in the realm.

The Ottoman sultan concentrated all imperial functions within his household. To administer the empire, he replicated his household structure in the capital and provinces. He centralised the system of rule through a communication network that collected all pertinent information in his palace in the capital, Constantinople. The sultan and his palace thus dominated the capital; except for the sultan's palace, apart from the mosque complex, there were no official buildings formed around him and expanded out into the empire through concentric circles.¹⁵

Jane Hathaway, in her insightful book *Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem*, explained the 'hierarchy of households' in more detail. Eunuchs 'were part of the population of members of the sultan's household', serving with the *devşirme* pages. Eunuchs were 'bound to the household head not only by condition of servitude but also by the ties of obligation and loyalty that accompanied membership in the household'. As Hathaway explained, it is only through the framework of the household can one understand the eunuch system of the Ottomans.

At the pinnacle of this hierarchy was the sultan's household, situated in the imperial palace in Istanbul, but below this were the households of various government ministers (*viziers*) and provincial governors, as well as the local notables – localized military officers, long-distance merchants, prominent Muslim scholars – of the provinces. The chief harem eunuch attained his office by successfully negotiating the tangle of patron-client ties that characterised the sultan's household. Because of his connexions to Egypt, furthermore, the chief eunuch, both before he attained that post and after he left it, formed lasting connexions with the households of Egypt's grandees.¹⁶

The sultans built administrations to concentrate power in their hands. To facilitate that, they eliminated aristocracies in the lands they conquered and placed executive functions in the hands of the slaves whom they trained. Since the slaves could only answer to their masters,

the sultans did not have to question the slaves' loyalties as much as they would a free administrator. Further, if the slave accumulated any wealth, it all belonged to the sultan. The government was a slave government 'in that the sultan in his harem was surrounded by female slaves, including his own mother, guarded by emasculated male slaves, and waited on by slave pages and valets, who brought him messages from slave officials',

The sultan then empowered the ulema, with its mullahs, to administer the law, including all legal and financial matters.¹⁷ The sultans also incorporated ghulams to assist in administering the empire.

Another institution characteristic of the Ottomans and one that further sets them off from any Western European feudal model is the ghulam (male slave) system. A Ghulam was a slave highly trained for service in the ruler's palace and state structure. Ghulams in the service of Muslim rulers came into importance in Islamic history as early as the reign of Caliph al-Mutasim (833–842).¹⁸

According to historian Barbara Tuchman, the Ottoman Turks 'were the last and destined to be the most enduring wave of warrior nomads who during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries had swept out of the Asian steppes to overwhelm Asia Minor, as the Goths and Huns before them had overwhelmed Rome.' When the Ottomans reached the Black Sea, they became subjects of the Seljuk Turk dynasty and guarded their frontier. Genghis Khan and his Mongol army, plus the army of his successors, overrode the Seljuk Turks. This allowed Osman I, also called Osman Gazi (1259–1326) and his followers to declare independence from Seljuk Turk dynasty that ended in 1308. Osman's Turkish name (Othman) is the origin for 'Ottoman' and the dynasty that he founded is the House of Osman (al-i-Osman). He was also the first of his line to use the title 'Sultan'.

In 25 years, with all the brutal energy of a people on the way up, they conquered key cities and large tracts of Anatolia and mastered the shores of the thin blue straits separating Asia from Europe.¹⁹

By the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Turks had surrounded Constantinople. The establishment of the capital of the Ottoman Empire

in that city began earnestly with the unsuccessful siege of 1391. In 1396, after four years of battle, Beyazıt I Yıldırı constructed a fortress on the Asian shore to blockade Constantinople. Called the Fortress of Asia or Anadolu Hisarı, Beyazıt anchored it at the narrowest point on the Bosphorus.²⁰ He was not able to conquer Constantinople because of the conquests of Tamerlane and his revived Mongol–Turkic army.

Overrunning Anatolia, leaving a trail of ruined cities and pyramids of skulls, Tamerlane met and defeated the Ottoman army at Angora (Ankara) in 1402 and captured the sultan alive. Kept in a wagon fitted with bars, Beyazıt was dragged along on the Mongol path of conquest until he died of misery and shame.²¹

About 60 years later in 1451, Mehmed II (r. 1451–1481) built a second fortress, Rumeli Hisarı, on the opposite side of the Bosphorus, facing that of his grandfather's. Mehmed II had also ruled from 1444 to 1446 when he was 12, and regained the throne in 1451 following the second reign of Murad II from 1446 to 1451. Murad II believed that his son was too young to defeat the Crusade army and other possible invaders. Following the defeat of the former and Murad's own death, Mehmed II regained the throne again. Using 3,000 skilled and unskilled workers, Mehmed II completed the massive fortress in four months. At that point, he completely cut off Constantinople from any possible assistance that might have arrived from the Black Sea to support the surrounded Byzantines.

In March 1453, Mehmed II began his siege of the city whose population was about 50,000. On 4 April, his cannon began to bombard the land walls that had held off invading armies for over 1,000 years. One of the cannons that he used was forged in Adrianople by a Hungarian named Urban. The barrel was over twenty-five feet long and could fire a quarter-ton stone cannonball a mile distant.²² To prevent an attack on the city from the Bosphorus, the Byzantines had assembled chain barricades across it. However, Mehmed II had his men drag 50 galleys over the land and around the chains, via greased surfaces, bypassing the obstruction. His army of 150,000 breached the walls on 29 May and he entered the city. From that day, Sultan Mehmed became known as Fatih Mehmed, or Mehmed the Conqueror.²³ Constantinople,

now renamed Istanbul, became the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Concurrently, there were other names as well.

Mahruse (the Capital), Dersaaset (Palace of Felicity), Belde-yi-Tayyibe (Land of Benediction), Asitane (the Threshold), Asitane-I Saadet (Threshold of Bliss), Dar-üs-Sultana (Place of Rule, i.e. Capital City), Dar-üs-Sultanat-üs-Seniyye (Exalted Place of Rule), and finally as Istanbul.²⁴

April and May 1453 saw cataclysmic events that, to some, foretold the end of the old order. In the South Pacific, there was a volcanic eruption in what is now Vanuatu, estimated to have been as powerful as two million atomic bombs of the type dropped on Hiroshima. There would be bad harvests in Europe in 1453 and 1454 as it blocked the sun on the planet. In April 1453, Constantinople had a series of severe thunder and hailstorms, while on 22 May there was a lunar eclipse described as 'terrifying'. Four days later fog enveloped Istanbul, then under siege, and when it lifted 'the defenders saw strange lights on the domes and windows of the buildings'. The Haghia Sophia, the grand Greek Byzantine church, looked as if flames were engulfing it, an optical illusion probably produced by an intense red twilight caused by the eruption on the other side of the planet. Reflected off the church's copper dome, it probably would have looked like fire. To some defenders, it seemed as if those were bad omens predicting the city's fall. On 29 May, it did fall.²⁵ Many historians date the start of the Renaissance and the end of the Middle Ages with the 1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. However, the capture of that magnificent city would internationally influence slavery, including African slavery.

The fall of Constantinople, however, and general expansion of Ottoman power and wealth, created problems of slave supply for Europeans in the Mediterranean, which were met partially by resort to trans-Atlantic trade at points that were directly competitive with trade to North Africa and Egypt.²⁶

During the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror, Mahmud Paşa (Adnî) rose to a high administrative position. In 1453, Mehmed appointed him Grand Vizier. Until the eighteenth century, it was common for men such

as Mahmud Paşa, a ghulam, to have such stature. His life illustrated how the ghulam system operated. Beginning his training as an enslaved youth in the palace, Mahmud Paşa became a footman. When Selim I (1512–1520) ascended to the throne, he left the Inner Service for a position in the Outer Service. Those who were part of the Inner Service served the sultan while those in the Outer Service were involved in affairs outside the palace and for the empire.

Since the Ottoman state was committed to conquest, it is not surprising to find that the departments composing the Outer Service were intimately concerned with military matters. Those departments included Janissaries, household cavalry, artillery, palace guards, quartermasters, armourers, falconers, stable personnel, and craftsmen such as swordmakers. Mehmed the Conqueror's power rested on his slave organisation, the slaves of the Porte, which he built up through the ghulam system to counterbalance the power of the frontier lords.²⁷

After rising to several leadership positions in the Outer Service, Mahmud Paşa received a promotion to chief gatekeeper of the palace, then sancakbegi (territorial administrator) of Anatolia. In 1559, he rose to the position of vizier. Unlike other slaves, the ghulam were sons of Christians converted to Islam and circumcised. Only about 10 per cent received the best available education for the highest positions in the empire. They were initially from the Balkans, the area of southeastern Europe comprising Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Rumania, Serbia and Thrace, and were unmarried boys between the ages of eight and 18.²⁸ The Ottomans deemed both European slaves and African slaves as necessary for the empire to function successfully.

Founder of the Ottoman state Orhan Gazi (1326–1359) created a professional Janissary (foot soldier) corps around AD 1330, before the capture of Constantinople. It became the sultan's elite bodyguard as well as his best fighting cavalry. The Ottomans used one in five captured Christian boys for service in the palace and others served in the Janissaries. Because the boys were slaves and had no family and no status except that provided by the sultan, they were fiercely loyal to him only, at least until 1826 when the corps was dissolved and a regular army

introduced. The extermination of the Janissaries became known as the 'Auspicious Incident'.

The enslavement of Christians, some have argued, was and is against Muslim religious law (*Şeriat*) and, therefore, is illegal. It seems there is some misconception, for Muslims can enslave 'People of the Book'. The status of *zimmî* could be bestowed upon 'people of the scriptures [Jews and Christians] who accepted the authority and supremacy of the Islamic state and made their contract with it'. To be a Jew or Christian only made one *eligible* to be a *zimmî*.

In return for their obeisance and acceptance of their subordinate status they were granted freedom of worship, freedom of owning property and personal freedom, that is, exemption from enslavement. Those 'People of the Book' who made war against Islam or who lived in the *dar-ül harb* [Abode of War] were not *zimmîs* but *harbîs*. Again those *zimmîs* who rebelled against the Islamic state, or who actively collaborated with a belligerent power against Islam, were considered to have renounced their protected minority status and reverted to the status of *harbîs*. The *harbîs* were liable to punishment, that is, death or slavery.²⁹

Orhan Gazi also assured his soldiers that, following a victory, they got the booty and could sack the cities. They also received 4/5 of the proceeds from the sale of slaves, the sultan receiving the remainder. They captured and enslaved males and females, the prettiest women for wives or concubines and, of course, only non-Muslims were enslaved. As an example of the quantity of slaves that could be captured, Murad II's (1421–1451) victory against Salonika provides a good example. In 1430, they captured so many that a 'good looking one was sold for the price of a pair of boots'. His men also received a share of confiscated lands for bravery, held as military fiefs, which they held for life.³⁰ Diplomat and traveller Ogier Busbecq, who was at the court of Süleyman the Magnificent (Süleyman the Lawmaker), commented on the importance of slaves:

Slaves constitute the main source of gain to the Turkish soldiers. If he brings back with him from a campaign nothing but one or two slaves, he has done well and is amply rewarded for his toil; for

an ordinary slave is valued at forty or fifty crowns, while if the slave has the additional recommendations of youth or beauty or skill in craftsmanship, he is worth twice as much. From this, I think, it is obvious what an enormous sum is made when five or six thousand prisoners are brought in from a campaign.³¹

When there were not enough captured Christians under Sultan Murad II, he instituted compulsory conscription of Christians to fill the ranks. That lasted until 1705, when Muslim recruits made conscription unnecessary. For 400 years, the Janissaries were the cream of the Ottoman army. Some of them were eunuchs, leading others to believe that it was the reason they exhibited such fierce loyalty.³² They placed Mustafa IV on the throne, indicating their power and influence.

In Busbecq's judgement, a professional standing army like the Janissaries had certain advantages. However, it also had serious flaws that 'must be counteracted by special precautions'. According to him, the most serious flaw was that the ruler is always afraid that the military might mutiny because 'the soldiers have it in their power to transfer their allegiances to whomsoever they will'. Busbecq accurately analysed the weakness in the use of the Janissaries that would become evident in 1705.³³ Their name is a corruption of the Turkish words 'Yeni Çeri', meaning 'New Troops'.³⁴

Süleyman (1520–1566) created a school for enslaved intelligent Christian boys. Later titled 'The sultan of the sultans of the world', every four years his agents combed the empire for inductees. Supposedly, those agents were 'a body of officials more skilled in judging boys than trained horse-dealers are in judging colts'. Those chosen became part of the Sultan's slave family and some of the highest positions in the land came from that group. Their education exceeded that 'of the then new university at Bologna'.

The training was very rough and included daily searches for contrabands of candies, spices and love letters. Spices were supposed to encourage sexual desires and the letters might be from another boy. There was to be no contact with females. The boys were not supposed to drink any alcohol. The sultan ruled every aspect of the boys' lives because he and the empire would depend on them. Despite the difficulties, each boy had an equal chance 'to rise to the highest positions in the land, for the Ottoman Empire was never ruled by Turks, but by a huge slave

family elevated in status after an enforced and gruelling education had fitted them to rule better than the average Turk'.³⁵

The Janissaries were supposed to remain celibate, which created particular difficulties. The reasoning was that the sultans did not want them to have children who might also join the ranks. Major problems with the Janissaries began when they had children and families, dividing their loyalties. One aspect of the system was that, supposedly, the older Janissaries were sexually molesting the recruits, as they were the only available sexual partners. One of the roles of the Chief Black Eunuch and his subordinates was to protect the recruits from sexual exploitation. By acting as protectors, the Chief Black Eunuch and possibly his successors were creating a loyal following that they might be able to depend upon in the future. It is clear that in some instances, the Chief Black Eunuch and the Janissaries worked together to obtain certain goals.

Süleyman exploited the idea of the *kullar*, an ironic term because it combines the slave family plus nobility. Usually those two concepts of slavery and majesty are mutually exclusive. The *kul* is still a slave but can also amass power to rule certain areas of the empire or certain domains under the sultan's jurisdiction. Some became essential government officials and military commanders. Süleyman had as many as 80,000 members of his *kullar*.³⁶

The strongest of the slave boys became Janissaries, the elite military corps of soldiers who believed in unquestioning obedience to the sultan. They were well paid and celibate and their discipline was unmatched by other soldiers. When asked about the use of non-Turkish soldiers one person responded, 'They surpass our soldiers for three reasons: they obey their commanders without question: they seem to care nothing at all for their lives in battle: they go for a long time without bread or wine, being content with barley and water.'³⁷ By the nineteenth century, though, the use of slaves for the military was dying out.

The Ottomans also enslaved girls and women from many parts of their empire and bought them from foreign lands. They served as servants, concubines, menials and other roles. The rich and the not so rich might have a slave girl or woman in their households. They purchased or acquired concubines through war and, after the master became tired of them, there was nothing to prevent their sale at the slave market. If they bore children of the master, they could obtain

freedom. What distinguishes a wife from a concubine is the dowry, for no slave has a dowry. Diplomat Ogier Busbecq observed the following in the sixteenth century:

A marriage-portion confers upon a woman the right to be mistress of her husband's household and gives her authority over all the other women. The husband, however, has the right to choose with whom he shall pass the night; he intimates his wishes to his wife, who sends him the slave whom he has selected. The latter perhaps obeys with more alacrity than the other gives the order.³⁸

The imperial household specifically had defined roles for its female slaves. At the top was the valide sultan (queen mother or dowager queen, a.k.a. Cradle of the Great and Mother-of-Pearl of the Pearl of the Caliphate) who was the sultan's mother. She was the woman sovereign and ruled the imperial harem. The harem eunuchs were under her authority, including the Kızlar Ağalar. Then there was the kadın (slave woman), or the sultan's favourite. Sometimes those two women were vying for power behind the sultan's back. Occasionally, the kadın became the valide sultan upon the current sultan's death and saw the elevation of her son to sultan. A sultan might have up to four principal kadins. The sultanas – aunts, sisters and daughters of the reigning sultan, were less powerful than the kadins because one of the latter might be the mother of the next sultan. İkbals were elevated from concubines because they bore the sultan a son, making them favourites of the sultan. Concubines were typically 'one night stands'. Odalisques were the lowest level of women and were servants. Many were virgins and unless that night she became pregnant with a male child, she might not ever see the sultan again. A pretty or talented odalisque could become a concubine and could rise to gedikli, one of the maids-in-waiting. Most were servants to the oda or court as a harem mistress. They would receive the title of Mistress of the Robes or Keeper of the Baths or of the Jewellry.

Another reason the Ottoman rulers preferred the concubinage system was that the women had no recognized lineage that anyone had to consider. In a patriarchal system where only the male became the ruler, the slave women's families were unimportant. If the sultan married, then the family of the wife would become an important consideration and the

question of family loyalties might arise.³⁹ The use of the African eunuchs to guard the harem supported that system because since they were 'shaved', they could not impregnate the women. Even if an African eunuch could somehow impregnate one of the women, there was a good chance (not 100 per cent certain by any means) that some of the child's physical features would eliminate the sultan as the father.

Ottaviano Bon, a Venetian who held a high diplomatic post, observed the palace system of White slaves. He wrote that the sources were from capture, gifts and the Law of Tribute Children (*devşirme*) as well as the Law of the Draught. The Law of Tribute, also known as 'Child Levy', stipulated the number of male children from conquered lands to be sent to the Ottoman court as tribute. The Ottomans used a draught every three to seven years, taking boys from ages eight to 20. Purchased slaves came from Eastern Europe, Russia, Poland, Lithuania and the Caucasus regions.

However, Turks preferred Georgian and Circassian (*Cerkesses*) slaves to such an extent that people in those regions built slave farms to meet the demand. The Circassians inhabited the northwestern Caucasus and part of the eastern coast of the Black Sea. They had several customs that insured the unification of the ten tribes.

One of the most striking features of Circassian life was the *Atalık*, i.e. the custom of handing children over to strangers immediately after birth to be brought up (the boys till their seventeenth–eighteenth year and girls till their fifteenth–sixteenth year). The foster-parents were treated with great reverence, and held a position almost superior to the actual parents.⁴⁰

Circassians not only reared other children for Ottoman slavery on slave farms, but also raised their own children to be palace slaves. That particular avenue was about the only way that, it appears, poor parents could almost ensure that their child would survive and perhaps, obtain a meritorious career.⁴¹ It appeared that most of the Circassians were nominally Muslims although after arrival at the Ottoman Court, the children were supposedly converted to Islam and then trained to serve the sultan.

Malik-Khanam, author of the book *Thirty Years in the Harem*, also noted the plight of Circassian women. First, she commented that the

position of slaves was 'not a very happy one'. She also stated that they were 'victims of misfortune and jealousy'.⁴²

The greater number are poor Circassians; the remainder comprise Arabs, Persians and others. They are sold to the slave-merchants, either by agents, who have brought them up, or by the parents themselves. The latter look upon their daughters as a means of raising money; they also think that by selling them they are contributing to their happiness. It is a fact that the women in Circassia spend any thing but an agreeable existence; being employed in the most labourious fieldwork, they are looked upon as mere beasts of burden by their fathers and husbands. All the household duties also devolve upon them. The men would scorn to abase themselves by doing any thing useful: they are warriors, and that is all.⁴³

The selling of numbers of children by their destitute parents could only happen if there was an established market for them. The Ottoman Empire profited from the revenues of slave taxes. In the Crimea, that revenue amounted to 21,000 gold ducats in 1520. During the years 1577 to 1578, the slave tax was 29 per cent of the total revenues from that region. The tax was approximately four gold ducats per slave. In some Ottoman cities during the second half of the fifteenth century, a slave sold for 25 to 50 gold ducats.⁴⁴

Guillaume Postel, a sixteenth century traveller and observer of the Ottoman Empire, wrote *De la république des Turcs*, printed in 1560. He asked several Turks why they preferred slaves and foreign rulers than their own people, a question many non-Turks would have asked and one that people continue to ask. He recorded their responses as 'the very philosophical and natural reply that they are better served thus [...] that there is not in the memory of anyone now living a single instance of a Christian thus nourished who has turned traitor'.

In the cities, most slaves worked in households. However, in the rural areas, there were some who were sharecroppers working in a system similar to that seen in the southern areas on the United States. War captives who became the sultan's share of slaves were settled in villages on government lands. The royal villages were usually in Thrace, western Anatolia and around Istanbul where the slaves were expected to supply

the city with their produce. Between 1453 and 1480, Mehmed II settled slaves in 163 villages around Istanbul and provided them land, tools and seeds. They had to turn over half of the produce and could keep the other half for themselves.

Generals returning from wars would bring back captives to settle on their croplands as well. In addition, the wealthy would buy slaves and settle them on their farms. The status of the sharecropping slaves was similar to the English serf system because if an owner sold the farm, the slaves were part of the sale. If the owner decided to place the land in a religious endowment (*waqf* or *vakıf*), the ownership of the slaves would also pass to that endowment. The following defines a *vakıf*:

The giving of property by will or by gift in perpetuity to the Islamic state for pious works or for the public good. It is then managed by a ministry of *Awqaf* [...] The proceeds pay for the upkeep of mosques and charities. Property given over to the *waqf* cannot be normally be regained by the original owners, its distinguishing feature being precisely that it is given in perpetuity.⁴⁵

The use of religious endowments was one way to divert revenues from the sultan's control. They also had civic functions such as providing soup kitchens, libraries, drinking fountains, and other valuable and needed services. A person invested wealth in an endowment and assigned family members to the governing boards as salaried employees for life and the lives of their descendants. Sometimes, a family might receive as much as three-quarters of the revenue. Upon approval from a judge and the sultan, the *waqf* was financially and administratively autonomous for all time.⁴⁶

During the late fifteenth and sixteenth early centuries, there are mentions of people from India as slaves in Bursa, the first Ottoman capital located in Anatolia (Asia Minor). Court records mention six slaveholders who freed six Indian slaves. In another case, Hızır Bey Ağa freed an Indian slave who was a eunuch who died in Cairo. Since the former owner of a slave could claim the slave's inheritance, Hızır sent another slave eunuch, possibly African, to claim the inheritance. A Persian merchant freed both his Ethiopian eunuch Cevher and his Indian slave, Kabil and left them both an inheritance.

African slaves of the Ottoman Empire were mostly Sudanese and Ethiopian, or 'Negroes' from the desert and southern Africa. Maghribians of North Africa from Tunis westward also were slaves, which was problematic because the North Africans were mostly Muslims and the Ottomans should not have enslaved them. That continues to be an issue for some persons. The Ottomans had organized three regencies or provinces, each ruled by a Turkish paşa – Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers. Black slaves from Africa south of the Sahara were in demand by the Ottomans during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it appears that very little research has focused on them. Populations for that trade lived either at the Sudanic regions or south of there and from the Atlantic Coast to as far to the east as Chad.⁴⁷

The Ottomans seized Egypt in 1517, not ending their rule in that part of the world until 1798 with the French invasion. In 1528, during the reign of Süleyman, the Portuguese felt that they needed a major supply post to control the East African spice trade. They plundered Mombasa for the second time and secured it as a base to monopolize trade. Also under Süleyman, the Circassian Mamluk (military bondsman or slave) from Egypt, Özdemir Bey, conquered Lower Nubia and the Red Sea coast, building garrisons at Aswan, Ibrim and Say. In 1589, during the reign of Murad III, Ottoman warships arrived and the Turks attempted to establish a stronghold through alliances with the anti-Portuguese elements. Nevertheless, the Portuguese successfully defeated their enemies. The Ottoman Turks finally occupied the strategic Red Sea port of Massawa (1557) and other points along the Ethiopian Empire coast until expelled by future emperor Sarsa Dengel (Malak Sagad, r. 1563–1597) in 1578. Ethiopia and the Turks finally signed a peace agreement in 1589.⁴⁸ However, the Turks continued to occupy Massawa itself for approximately 200 years. The Ottomans planned to make northern Ethiopia a province, calling the conquered area Habeşh, later known as Sawakin and Jidda. Those two setbacks probably not only stemmed Ottoman control of the lucrative spice trade, but also their direct involvement with the East African slave trade.

Meanwhile in Turkey, Havva Hanım, who died approximately 1860–1861, was a wealthy provincial woman from Anatolia. Her inheritance inventory listed her properties, household goods, debts, shares in farms, livestock, seed, investments, jewellery, ships and slaves. African slaves staffed her farm and included 'a man and his daughter, a family of three,

and four single men, one of them a eunuch'. Hacı Abdullah, an architect and builder who lived in Bursa, also left an inheritance inventory that included his slaves.

Apart from family members, Hacı Abdullah's household contained nine slaves. Only two were men; one is not mentioned by name, and therefore may have been a recent acquisition not yet converted to Islam. The other, called Süleyman, may have been Georgian. Noteworthy is the reference to an *acem* woman named Rukiyye and her daughter Zeyneb. As the child was also a slave, she was probably not her master's daughter, and [. . .] must have been very young. Gülbeyaz, Hanım, Hüsnüsa and Latife were also classed as *acem*, while the slave woman Fatma was recorded as *arab*, that is, presumably, African.

Again, Malik-Khanam observed the slave trade in Tophane. She noted that when anyone wanted to buy a slave, he applied to the gentry and they provided scantily clad young peasant girls for inspection. Many had just left their mountain homes and could only speak their own language. The prices varied according to their beauty.

If they are not good-looking, they are only employed in duties that do not necessitate their appearance in the presence of their masters, in which case their value does not exceed from fifteen hundred to two thousand francs. They are sold usually at about twelve or thirteen years of age, but there are cases of sales at the early age of six or seven. This happens, however, only where a lady wishes to bring them up as her slaves, either to accustom them to her service, or to re-sell them at a profit when they are older.⁴⁹

Their mistresses taught them to speak Turkish, to dress sexily and to develop a specific talent such as music. If the slave could possibly become an odalisque, the mistresses trained them to dress gracefully, to serve coffee or sherbet appropriately, to seat guests correctly according to station, and to accompany the mistresses properly.

When they have received this primary education their value is proportionately augmented, and it is at this period that they

are resold. The singers, the performers on the guitar, flute, tabor, or tambourine, the dancers and castanet-players, then enter the harems of great ladies, whom they are required to entertain. These are held in the highest estimation.⁵⁰

People soon found out if a mistress owned a pretty slave and men desiring an odalisque or wife began to make offers. Some men wanted slave women as wives over free women because there would be no family to consider. A girl was not supposed to be sold as a wife or odalisque without her permission, but in many instances the seller ignored that stipulation.

The purchase of a slave is transacted in the following manner: After having examined her from head to foot, the intending purchaser, male or female, agrees on the price. The bargain concluded, next day the girl is sent to his or her house, accompanied by an old woman, who never lets her out of her sight. She remains several days, in order that it may be ascertained whether or not she has any material defect. A midwife is called in to make sure that the newcomer has never previously had intercourse with any one. It is after this examination that the purchase-money is paid, and the sale legalised by a formal receipt called *petcheb*.⁵¹

Malik-Khanam further noted that the slave was miserable in every house because wives and odalisques had superior positions. If the husband married the slave woman, the old wife had to share the husband, reducing the status of the first wife. Though that was not supposed to happen, it did. If the first wife were also a slave, there would be jealousy but if the first wife was free and from a wealthy family, the new slave wife would lead a life of humiliation and debasement.

When a slave enters the harem of a lady of high rank, her situation is truly deplorable [...] she is usually compelled to spend her nights standing, attendant on the riotous excesses of her mistress. From sheer caprice, they often find themselves condemned to be scourged by eunuchs armed with *curtatches*, or whips of elephant's skin.

On the other hand, these unhappy creatures are often subjected at once to the desires of their master and the terrible jealousy of their mistress. Threatened with perpetual celibacy, excited by the idea of being chosen either as odalisques or as wives of the second grade, frequently taken advantage of by force – every thing contributes to their downfall. As soon as their mistress has an inkling of any intrigue, all the vials of her fury are poured out. Her husband, his patience being at length exhausted, abandons his victim to the resentment of his wife, who proceeds to get rid of her rival forthwith by selling her.⁵²

If the slave was pregnant, the owner could not sell her while in that condition. If her child was a boy, he could not sell him either. Therefore, the mistress took pregnant slaves to midwives for abortions. Some more fortunate household slaves were able to serve their mistresses yet avoided drawing the attention of their masters.

Another aspect of Ottoman slavery (and the attitude of Islam in general toward slavery) is that according to many, slavery was only to be a temporary and accidental condition. Mehmed II, for example, supposedly freed 40,000 of his slaves after his campaign against Persia.⁵³ Obviously, not all Turks or other Muslims subscribed to that, but many did. As slavery developed in the New World, it became the permanent status of a person. In addition, Muslim slaves, except in certain areas, were not manual labourers such as in the New World. The Qur'an did encourage pious Muslims to manumit their slaves, and many did. Ottoman records show that there were the following categories of manumission.

- (1) Unconditional manumission made while the owner was alive and in good health.
- (2) Conditional (tebir) manumission granted for some particular act or event.
- (3) Contractual (mukataba) manumission.
- (4) The manumission of one's female slave who bore the master's child.
- (5) Court-ordered manumission because of some misbehaviour by the owner toward the slave.⁵⁴

Non-Muslims sometimes have difficulty with the first type because 'it contradicts both practice and theory, in all of the Western slave systems of which we are familiar'. If manumission were to take place at the death of the owner, no one could prevent that transaction even if the estate had a financial or tax problem. However, if the value of the slave exceeded one-third the value of the estate, the slave would have to pay the difference to the heirs.

Conditional manumission hinged on an event such as upon death or upon return or non-return. Under Ottoman law, it would be very difficult for an owner to retract the pledge or to attach other conditions later. In case the owner died, the one-third rule would still apply. Contractual manumission was similar to conditional manumission but usually involved a financial arrangement between the slave and the owner. Manumission might take place after a certain time span or perhaps after producing a predetermined amount of output.

The *umm-i valed*, or birth of a child of a slave mother and a free father, was very common. The father was supposed to manumit both the mother and the child, but to do so he had to admit paternity. While some men had no problem with admitting paternity, others attempted to keep both the mother and the child as slaves. Sometimes, it took a court ruling to decide if the slave and child should be manumitted. There are court records in which a woman had taken her owner to court, with witnesses, to prove paternity. The courts might also find a master guilty of violating a work contract or it might free a person deemed illegally enslaved. The child, if from an African mother and a non-African father, would probably have been considered non-African.

Ottoman court records contain information about manumissions, which had to be recorded. One example of a pious manumission occurred when an owner named Hacı İbrahim, to celebrate his son's circumcision, freed his Abyssinian slave. One example of a contractual manumission occurred in Ankara during the late 1500s, when a Black slave was granted freedom. However, the slave had to serve his master for two-and-a-half more years. This might be a case of the slave not being able to produce an agreed upon amount of money, or for some reason the owner wanted to guarantee manumission of the slave in the event of some possible changes in the future.⁵⁵

One problem with manumissions of any type was the need for replacements, allowing the slave trade to continue or even expand.

As one author pointed out, 'The frequency of manumission and the imbalanced sex ratio thus suggest a very high replacement rate required to maintain an Islamic domestic slave population at any given level.' To compound the problem, there were relatively high death rates because of the harsh conditions related to crossing the Sahara and 'the change in climate, diet, and disease ecology experienced in the new setting'.⁵⁶

Recent research has confirmed the high death rates for African slaves generally during the passage out of Africa and into the Mediterranean region. It appears that it was just as lethal as 'treks and voyages of the Atlantic slave trade', putting an end to the 'comforting myth of the system's benignity'. Rates were still high even if the slaves were fed and cared for.⁵⁷

Besides the legal forms of manumission there was always the illegal manner – running away. If caught, however, the owner could severely punish and even kill the slave. If the fate of the slave ended in death, there would be restitution paid to the owner. Runaway slaves, then, risked a lot to flee their circumstances but it is also indicative of the brutal lives some of them led.⁵⁸ A sixteenth-century observer described the plight of slaves as he was leaving Istanbul:

Just as we were leaving the city, we were met by wagonloads of boys and girls who were being brought from Hungary to be sold in Constantinople. There is no common kind of merchandise than this in Turkey; and just as on the roads out of Antwerp one meets loads of various kinds of goods, so from time to time we were met by gangs of wretched Christian slaves of every kind who were being led to horrible servitude. Youths and men of advanced years were driven along in herds or else were tied together with chains, as horses with us are taken to market, and trailed along in a long line. At the sight I could scarcely restrain my tears in pity for the wretched plight of the Christian population.⁵⁹

Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire when Selim I ('the Grim') defeated the Mamluks. The Mamluk soldiers were 'the Turkish-speaking non-Egyptians who started their careers technically as slaves of one or another bey and remained very much clients of the specific bey even after manumission'.⁶⁰ Many were eastern Europeans who converted to Islam while in Egypt and then trained as soldiers. The Mamluk system had

racial preferences that excluded Africans and Indians until the nineteenth century, except for a few hundred Black troops at the end of the fifteenth century. The only way that so-called 'coloureds' could join the Mamluk hierarchy was as eunuchs.⁶¹ When the Ottomans routed the last Mamluk sultans in Egypt during January 1517, they then wielded power into Nubia to the Third Cataract. In addition, Selim I assumed the title of caliph, leader of the Sunni Muslim community (community of the faithful). To the west, 'the provinces of Tripolitania, Tunisia, and Algeria became administrative divisions of the Ottoman *Maghrib al-Adna*'. Because those areas were outside the main influence of the empire, the Ottoman power was weak and by the seventeenth century, was decreasing significantly. Selim's military expansion, which included northern Africa, almost doubled the size of the Ottoman Empire. African land under the control of the Ottoman Empire from the end of the reign of Selim I to the beginning of the reign of Ahmed I increased from 101,000 square miles to 195,500 square miles.⁶²

The Ottoman Turks controlled high-level government and military positions and many in them mixed with the local population. Bosnians, an important segment of the Ottoman elite, also emigrated there. Two highly prosperous cities were Cairo and Algiers and both would gain importance in supplying eunuchs, as well as other slaves. Algiers had a population of 100,000 and an economy based on piracy and sales of European slaves. Selim I had his pirate, the famous Barbarossa (Hayreddin Hızır Paşa), capture Algiers for him. Barbarossa continued his work for Selim's son, Süleyman the Magnificent, and captured Algeria. He later commanded the entire Ottoman naval forces as Grand Admiral.

The Ottomans selected Cairo to be the seat of their power. Therefore, it controlled much of the commercial life elsewhere in Egypt as well. Almost all of the Egyptian trade of any value had to pass through Cairo, plus the city served as a jumping-off point for pilgrims going to and from Mecca.⁶³ There were attempts to overthrow the Ottoman powers but Egypt would remain nominally in their hands until Napoleon defeated the Mamluks in 1798 and then the forces of Selim II in 1799.

According to a customs register from the port of Antalya dated 1559, of the large variety of imports from Egypt via Antalya by sea, black slaves, both male and female, constituted the bulk of

the traffic. Many ships carried slaves exclusively. The slave merchant Seydi Ali, for instance, brought eighteen black slaves from Egypt in one expedition. Black slaves imported via Antalya went to Anatolian cities, in particular to Konya and Bursa. From Antalya, white slaves were shipped to Syria and Egypt, though in much smaller number than black slaves.⁶⁴

Slavery in the Ottoman Empire seemed to be more complex than that of the African-Atlantic slave trade. It was 'a vital social, cultural and political component of Ottoman life', serving primarily as domestics, menial workers and, in some instances, agricultural labourers. One important voice is usually missing from the discussion and that is the voice of the slaves. While New World slavery generated many slave narratives, the personal experiences and perceptions of the Ottoman institution of slavery by the slaves themselves, with few exceptions, have not surfaced. Therefore, those supporting slavery or those who owned slaves remain the ones who defined the institution:

[U]nlike the situation in the study of slavery in other societies, scholars who deal with Muslim societies have not been able so far to discover many sources that emanate from the slaves themselves. As of now, we do not possess first-hand, direct accounts by Ottoman slaves, nor by slaves in other Muslim societies. No diaries compiled by slaves have been found; no slave family histories or the like have come to light. Slaves do appear in Ottoman texts, but these are mostly government and court records, where slaves made statements to judges and police investigators. These utterances were recorded by state officials, and are therefore at least one removed from genuine personal accounts. Thus, Ottoman slaves are indeed '*contained*' and '*represented*' by their masters of other non-slaves in society.⁶⁵

There was another consequential difference between the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Ottoman trade. In the former, a sophisticated system made vast amounts of money from the labour of the slaves. Its entire purpose was for personal and corporate profits. In the Ottoman system and other systems customarily operated by Muslims, the dealers made most of the profits, not the final purchasers.

That did not mean that Ottoman slavery was necessarily less cruel than the trans-Atlantic system, because it was, for many slaves. But it did mean that the Ottoman slaves could be acknowledged as people, not as mere units of labour.

John Hunwick effectively argued that there were aspects of race in the Muslim slave trade and, because of religious interpretations, it would have extended in the Ottoman slave trade. It appears, however, that racial prejudice was associated with religion. Hunwick described a fatwa of 1533–1534 that was to provide guidance to assess which African people could be enslaved when not Muslims at the time of their capture. In his opinion, al-Makhluf al-Balbali wrote that African Muslims were ‘the people of Kano, some of Zakzak (Zaria), the people of Katsina, the people of Gobir [Gobirwa], and all of Songhay [and] all the Fulan(i)’. Anyone from those areas or who claimed to be from those areas was to be freed from slavery by virtue of their religion. Those Black Africans not from those areas could be automatically enslaved, even for life.⁶⁶

Another question arose, and that was what should happen if the slave’s origin was unknown? Should one accept the word of a slave, or should there be doubts? To answer the question, the fatwa ruling considered the story of Noah. If Africans were Hamites (descendants of Noah’s son Ham) and if Hamites were cursed to serve the descendants of their brothers, does that not make Black Africans future slaves? If the offspring of Shem and Japheth are the ancestors of Arabs, Turks, Persians and Slavs, then slavery should be accepted for Blacks. But, are there some descendants of Shem and Japheth who were also nonbelievers? Why single out Black Africans? What about those who were converted through a jihad and those who converted on their own?

Since the people of Songhay, Bornu and the aforementioned lands converted without conquest, Muslims should not enslave them because they ‘converted to Islam without compulsion’ a long time ago. Black Africans, then, were inherently slaves. Further, the ruling stated that ‘any unbeliever among the children of Ham, or anyone else, may be possessed [as a slave] if he remains attached to his original unbelief. There is no difference between one race and another.’ What the ruling also did was to help to ensure that one would not be enslaving another Muslim, which would have an impact on one’s soul. There would be further consequences if one took a Muslim woman, enslaved her and then made her a concubine.⁶⁷

Bernard Lewis examined this subject in depth in his book, *Race and Color in Islam*. According to his research, the Qur'an does refer to colour and language, an awareness of difference, but lacks the concept of racial prejudice. Ancient Arabic literature, for instance, uses descriptive terms for colours that we still use today and ones that we do not – black, white, red, green and yellow, plus light and dark brown. After the death of the Prophet in 632, colour concepts began to become more fixed, so that black becomes synonymous for sub-Saharan Africans, red for Arabs, Persians, Greeks, Turks, Slavs, etc. By the early Islamic period, dark-skinned Arabs, those of African and Arab parentage and pure Africans were seen as suffering from an infliction and, therefore, ripe for discrimination. For instance, the poet Suhaym (d. 660), a slave of African origin, wrote, 'If my colour were pink, women would love me. But the Lord has marred me with blackness.'⁶⁸

Even if the death of Suhaym resulted from his many dalliances with women, it is obvious that black skin became something negative. To augment that belief are the existence of Hadiths collected after the Prophet's death, many of them spurious, but all of which are purported to be his utterances. One of them concerns Ethiopians and declared, 'When he is hungry he steals, when his is sated he fornicates.'⁶⁹

There are also morality stories, jokes and sayings that at the same time reaffirm the supposed low condition of Blacks, such as the following.

God has decreed that the most devout is the noblest even if he be a Negress's bastard, and that the sinner and unbeliever is at the lowest level even if he be the son of prophets.⁷⁰

The fourteenth century Persian writer Ibn Khaldun wrote about the difference between Black and White slaves, also asserting that the former were inferior people. He noted, 'The only people who accept slavery are the Negroes [Sudan], owing to their low degree of humanity and their proximity to the animal stage.'⁷¹ What writers such as Ibn Khaldun and others had done was to disregard the pious Islamic view as expressed in the Qur'an and impose other opinions that they inserted into mainstream discourses on race. It appears, then, that race was a factor in the Muslim, and specifically the Ottoman, slave trade. However, it does not seem to have its origins in the religion but from the personal

convictions of some of its practitioners, particularly those who benefited and who needed rationalisation.

Black Slaves in Ottoman Cyprus, Late 1500s and Early 1600s

By the end of the sixteenth century, one might see free and enslaved Africans in Aydın, one of the Empire's Aegean provinces. Their numbers were so great that an official edict (rescript) from Istanbul prohibited their assembly. Although it reflected the laws against the assembly of Africans that the American colonies would enact, some historians proposed that the purpose was religious in nature. On Ottoman Cyprus, enslaved and free Africans left records in registers of Muslim judges. African slaves were divided into the following four categories but the courts seemed to have used them interchangeably.

- (1) Zanci (Ethiopian) or zangi (Ethiopian or Negro)
- (2) Siyah (Black or dark)
- (3) Arab or Arap (Black Arab, Black African or Ethiopian)
- (4) Habeşi (Ethiopian)

Other words also defined a slave such as 'abd', 'memluk', and 'gulam', and they could apply to both Blacks and Whites. 'Cariye' meant a female slave, but 'memluk' sometimes referred a female Black slave as well. With the exception of habeşi, the records might use any term but they were consistent in only using one term through a specific record.

Because African slaves sometimes passed through Cyprus before being sent to other areas of the Ottoman Empire, those records could reveal their country of origin or place of shipment. The records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show that slave raiders from Darfur (Sudan) went as far south as Ethiopia to the route between Gondar and Sinnar. Most were 'shipped north along the Red Sea from Beylul and Zayla, and smaller ports as well, to Suez and then Cairo'. Massawa, a Red Sea port terminus of a major trade route, also shipped many slaves so that ships were traversing the Red Sea with their human cargo.

Although the most likely origin of black slaves in Cyprus would have been the Sudan and Ethiopia, important trans-Saharan slave routes connected Wadai, Bornu, Chad, and Kano to Benghazi and

Tripoli on the Mediterranean, or even ultimately to Cairo by routes north of the Sahara. Other slaves must have entered the Ottoman world via Tunis and Algiers.⁷²

Though African slaves were common in Cyprus from the late 1500s until the middle 1600s, the court records only reveal a handful. However, of the 44 slaves in the records, 22 were African. The others were Greek, Russian, Circassian, Hungarian, etc. However, if 50 per cent of the slaves in the court records were African, one might assume that they probably composed a significant percentage of all slaves. The court records noted that female African slaves slightly exceeded males (12:10) and White males slightly more than doubled the number of White females (15:7). While White females seemed to be used solely as concubines, African female slaves sometimes served as concubines but also as household servants. Additionally, the value of African and White slaves in Cyprus seemed to have been about equal.

During that period, the court recorded the emancipation of six African slaves, three males and three females. There also were intermarriages between Africans and Whites, as illustrated in a case initiated by a Black man named Ramazan (Ramadan). Ramazan claimed to be the legitimate son of Rustem and that his mother was Mercan, 'a black female slave from whom I was born'. Another man, Sinan, claimed that he legitimately purchased Ramazan as a slave. The court record recorded that Ramazan pronounced, 'I have witnesses. Let them be heard in court.' The witnesses swore that the late Rustem confirmed, 'Ramazan is my slave (memlugum), born from my black female slave (siyah cariyem) Mercan. He is my legitimate son (sulbi obli).' Under Islamic law, he was a free person.⁷³

The Nineteenth Century African Slave Traffic in Ottoman Egypt

Arabs brought Islam to Egypt in the seventh century AD, several centuries after Christians introduced their religion. It had been almost entirely a Christian (Coptic) country but that religion began to decline after the Arab conquest. First the Persians, then the Macedonian Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantine Greeks, the Arabs, Turkish and Circassian Mamluks and then the Ottomans ruled Egypt in succession. When the

Ottomans arrived in 1517, their conquest gave them control over the Muslim Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, 'making them nominal leaders of the Muslim world and reducing Egypt to a province'. From the late sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire 'was transforming itself into a bureaucratic state and bastion of Sunni Islam'.

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte's army invaded Egypt and defeated the Mamluks, occupying the country for three years. Following the French withdrawal, Albanian adventurer Muhammad Ali received his appointment as paşa of Egypt in 1805, finally eliminating the Mamluks in 1812. He began his conquest of the Sudan in 1820 and when Ali died in 1849, Egypt controlled several hundred thousand square miles. His grandson, Lord or Khedive İsmail, came to power in Egypt in 1863 and extended its control into Ethiopia, Darfur (western Sudan), the Somali coast and other East African kingdoms. By 1875 Egypt, although supposedly a province of the Ottoman Empire, had many elements of an independent state.⁷⁴

During the Mamluk sultanate period (1250–1517) that governed Egypt, Syria, the Hejaz and southern Anatolia, the Habeşis held important administrative positions. Labelled Ethiopians or Nubians, many of the Habeşis were originally from the Upper Nile Valley and Eastern Sudan, arriving in Egypt already emasculated. Many attained the status of free people and maintained 'a close relationship with former masters, rising or falling with them according to the vicissitudes of court politics'. They served in bureaucracies that included the harems, in commercial and mercantile business, guarded holy places and engaged in pious scholarship. It appears that many began their careers in households or in the Mamluk barracks but still managed to achieve social mobility.

The range of executive offices defines the special routes to power and wealth open to eunuchs in the Mamluk military system. Clearly the most prominent was the trainer of recent recruits (julban) in the royal barracks [...] Eunuchs were designated for this post to guard their charges from the political infighting and personal vices of senior Mamluk troopers. Individuals so appointed had demonstrated force of character and unswerving loyalty to their royal patron, who could trust them with the education of his young soldiers. Such patrons were quite willing to pay their muqaddamu 'l-mamalik salaries appropriate to an emir's, thus ensuring their clients' resistance to bribery.⁷⁵

In the ensuing period, Darfur, a Sudanese sultanate, was actively involved in the African slave trade and some captives ended up in the Ottoman Empire. A larger than normal caravan would have 2,000 camels and 1,000 slaves. An exceptionally large caravan to Egypt in 1798 brought 12,000 slaves. Slaves were the basic export and French sources reported that, during 1798 and 1801, 5,000 to 6,000 slaves went to Egypt annually.⁷⁶ During the 1830s, Egypt imported about 10,000 slaves but, during the 1840s, only 5,000. The 1850s saw a decrease to about 3,500 but because of the cotton boom of the 1860s, the numbers soared to 10,000.

Unlike other parts of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt used African slaves in the military as well as for agricultural production. Still a small number of African males 'worked as attendants in wealthier families or as assistants to artisans, shopkeepers, and merchants'. Most African slaves during that time were women domestics and menials in urban areas. Lower middle-class families could afford at least one African slave woman but White slave women, a minority in nineteenth century Egypt, were in harems primarily.⁷⁷ Egypt classified their slaves according to gender and colour – white, brown or bronze and black. For 600 years, the Mamluks, Turkic and Caucasian (today, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians) slaves, were soldier elites who ruled there. By the first half of the nineteenth century, however, they no longer ruled but still held powerful posts.⁷⁸

'Turks', those who lived in Egypt who were from the non-Arabic areas of the Ottoman Empire, owned many of the White slaves during that period. Besides the male Mamluks, they and rich Egyptians also owned male and female Greek slaves. Previously, almost all of the White slaves were Circassians and Georgians; there was a preference for the White slaves above the others. Because they were beyond the reach of most Egyptians except for the rich, others had to content themselves with Abyssinian girls as slaves and concubines. In the hierarchy of preference, the Abyssinian girls, many of them Galla (Oromo) people, occupied a niche between the White and the Black slaves.

Most of Egypt's 30,000 slaves were Black from various areas of Africa, and most were domestics. If a family had free servants, the Black people did the menial work. Only the ruling Muhammad Ali family and rich Turks could afford Black eunuchs, many of who also owned slaves. Muhammad Ali's family and other rich Egyptians used Black slaves as

agricultural labourers. Egypt was one of the few Muslim countries that practised non-domestic slavery⁷⁹ After Ali's forces occupied the Sudan (1820–1885), there was a dramatic escalation of the slave trade and southern Ethiopia was forced to supply them.⁸⁰ Muhammad Ali's Turco–Egyptian rule in the Sudan saw the exportation of 30,000 slaves a year for 60 years of Ottoman rule.⁸¹ The Afar (also Danakil or Adal), a Sunni Islamic ethnic group now located south of Eritrea and east into Djibouti, were heavily involved in the slave trade. As late as 1928, they were reported to be guides to Arab slavers.⁸²

Muhammad Ali Paşa was an Albanian Muslim from Kavala and the Ottoman governor of the Turkiyya, a regime that held sway south of Egypt through the Sudan, for 61 years, ending in 1881. It put an end to the Funj Sultanate and established the Turco–Egyptian regime. From 1801 until 1882, Egypt was a province of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkiyya raided the Sudan for non-Muslim slaves, some of whom they trained in Upper Egypt and then conscripted into military while others they sold in slave markets as menials. It taxed the population heavily and frequently the Muslim Sudanese could only pay those assessments in slaves, particularly to the Turkish rulers. The Turkiyya built the new capital of Khartoum and held power until an Islamic revolution, under the leadership of the Mahdi (the Rightly Guided One), took control and captured the capital in 1885. Khartoum, located on the confluence of the White Nile and Blue Nile, became the centre for the slave trade. Muhammad Ahmad Ibn 'Abdallah al-Mahdi (the Mahdi) and his forces, Shi'ite Muslims, began their conquest of Egyptian Sudan, finally ending the Turkiyya in 1884 and certainly by the death of general, administrator and antislavery backer Charles George Gordon Paşa in January 1885.⁸³ Previously, Turkish rule in the Sudan was notorious 'for its brutality and crass commercialism'. The profits that one could amass led to violations of Islamic practice, 'namely the ban on enslaving Muslim peoples by fellow Muslims'.⁸⁴

Because the ivory trade was not as successful as the Turkiyya predicted, they opened the upper White Nile to other commerce. Europeans, Egyptian, Levantine (countries bordering on the eastern Mediterranean) and Sudanese merchants began to trade in slaves. The trade was intense in 'southern Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, upper Blue Nile, and Ethiopia'.⁸⁵

Until the British occupied Egypt, Sudanese slaves became soldiers under Mamluk officers and during the late 1830s, there were 2,500 of them. When in power, Muhammad Ali Paşa began his recruitment of thousands of Black slaves to build his modern army, but later abandoned that plan. Still, they remained a presence in the Egyptian army until the end of the 1800s. Seyyid Said (1791–1856), Sultan of Zanzibar, now Tanzania, plus Imam (leader of the Muslim community) of Muscat, used Sudanese slaves as soldiers as well as for his personal bodyguards when he prohibited the slave trade.

Ottomans also used Blacks in its military according to a British naval report of 1858 that told of Black marines in the Turkish navy. Adolphus Slade, a British naval officer, wrote that the men were either freed slaves or slaves abandoned by merchants who could not sell them. Slade reported seeing a group of 70 enrolled in a Black company that had a Black lieutenant and some sergeants. Further, they received the same pay, quarters, rations and clothing as other Turkish marines.⁸⁶

White slaves were brought to Egypt from the eastern coast of the Black Sea and from the Circassian settlements of Anatolia via Istanbul. Brown and black slaves were brought from (a) Darfur [eastern Sudan] to Asyut, directly or through Kordofan [eastern Sudan]; (b) from Sennar [on the Blue Nile] to Isna; (c) from the area of the White Nile; (d) from Bornu [west of Lake Chad] and Wadai [central Sudan] via Lydia and the Western Desert; (e) from Abyssinia and the East African coast through the Red Sea. The slave dealers in Egypt were mainly people from Upper Egypt and the Oases, bedouin and villagers of the Buhayra province. They were divided into dealers in black and in white slaves and organised in a guild with a shaykh.⁸⁷

The Wadai (Sudan) to Benghazi (Cyrenaica region of Libya) trade route was not only remote, but also the most difficult. It was a more direct route to the Mediterranean although it was long and, in some places, had deep-water wells some distance from each other. Arms and other trade goods flowed the other direction, making the route a prosperous one commercially. It was the slave trade, however, that was the foundation of the route. The numbers of slaves fluctuated but was

comparatively small, amounting to only a couple thousand a year by the mid-1800s. In September 1847, the British vice-counsel reported caravans arriving every two years with between 800 and 1,000 slaves, plus smaller caravans would arrive two or three times a year with approximately 150 slaves each. He noted that about 700 slaves were exported annually to Constantinople and Canea [Crete].

The crossing itself could be extreme, as the losses of the slaves could reach between one-fifth to one-half of the captives. Deaths did not come necessarily from cruel treatment as from 'natural causes, sharp variations in desert temperatures, shortages of water, and sandstorms that could bury whole caravans'. The vice-consul at the time also wrote that many of the slaves were abandoned, not because of the lack of food and water, but because their feet had swollen so much from the hot sands that they could not keep up. Since there were no spare camels, caravans left them behind.⁸⁸

Etienne Felix Berlioux assembled a collection of his personal observations on the nineteenth century African slave trade in Egypt, along with recollections of others. At that time, Egypt was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. One has to evaluate his comments very critically because besides being antislavery, he also seems to be anti-Islamic. Simultaneously, he does make some salient points and, therefore, one cannot completely dismiss some of his arguments. Further, many who investigate the system of slavery focus on the 'front end' – how the slaves were treated, opportunities they might have had, status attained, etc. Berlioux at least examined the 'back end' of Ottoman slavery and wrote about the destruction of families and communities in Africa in 1872.

He investigated the institution of slavery in Central Africa, the Middle Valley of the Nile, the Upper Valley of the Nile, and Egypt. He began by stating that the sultan, 'by an impious aberration believes he performs a pious work in spreading devastation around him'.⁸⁹ His self-righteousness is obvious but his critique on the havoc wreaked by slavers who are supplying the markets of distant people with African slaves is necessary. When writing about slavery and the Middle Valley of the Nile, Berlioux commented on what seemed to be common knowledge about the Ottoman slave trade – the market continued in spite of protestations to the contrary. Khartoum continued to be a slave-trading centre, but the sales were outside the city limits.

Slaves have not appeared there since Turkey prohibited the importation of the negroes fifteen years ago. Secret correspondents come to conduct them beyond the city by the desert to their destination, of which of course they know nothing. It is by these means that the enormities of the slave trade have been concealed, as with an impenetrable evil.⁹⁰

Berlioux seems just as self-righteous when he wrote about the Coptic Church of Ethiopia, probably the earliest of the Christian churches. While he would have capitalized the word 'Christianity', he does not do so in his references to the Copts. Still, he described the profitability of the slave trade in the Upper Nile, the 'robberies' of children and other obscure details.

Manhunting is practiced on the frontiers of Abyssinia, where it sometimes takes the character of hostility between the races and religion. The tribes who live on the elevated terraces whence the Blue Nile descends, enclosed in their mountains as in a citadel, have retained some generous ideas with their disfigured Christianity. The Arabs who occupy the deserts at the foot of those mountains keep them at war and in a state of siege, and have done so for ages.⁹¹

When he examined the slave trade in Egypt proper, Berlioux exposed the lax enforcement of the Edict of 1857's official prohibition of the trafficking in African slaves (that continued unofficially until the 1890s). He used the routes of the slavers plus geography to support his allegations. He believed that 'were the Ottoman Government and that of Cairo seriously desirous of abolishing the slave trade, nothing could be more easy'. He further noted that the desert caravans 'escape without trouble; and the immensity of the ocean is equally favourable to the vessels of the man-hunters; but in the extensive valley of the Nile, in which the choice of the route is restricted, inasmuch as all transports go by the river, supervision and repression would be easy.'⁹² Furthermore, those enslaved in the Ottoman Empire before 1857 had to maintain their slave status.⁹³

Berlioux cited a 'Mr. Baker' who also commented on the lax enforcement of antislavery efforts. Baker soundly chides Egypt for

continuing the African slave trade but, in all fairness, England did not seem to be pressing the issue as much as she could. One has to ponder with seriousness whether the claim of deception is authentic. England at that time had trade agreements with Egypt and other areas of the Ottoman Empire whose products employed slave labour. According to Berlioux, 'Egypt favours slavery [...] every ostensible demonstration made by the Egyptian government against the traffic of the blacks, is nothing more than a formality for the purpose of deceiving the powers of Europe [...]'.⁹⁴

The 'Mr. Baker' referred to was Samuel White Baker, the British writer who informed both British officials and the public about slavery in his three volumes. Printed between 1866 and 1867, he postulated that European powers, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire had no great desire to end the slave trade in the Sudan. Clearly, Baker was racist in his attitudes concerning Black people generally. He did not believe that they had the capacity to govern themselves and, once freed, had to be forced to work and watched closely so that they would not retaliate against Whites. Because antislavery attitudes were popular amongst English gentlemen at the time, Baker was echoing the sentiments of other 'gentlemen'.

Baker believed that the slave trade stood in the path of all 'commerce and improvement'. Civilisation could not progress until that time and, when it did, he could open up the ivory trade, capturing a new market. He later realized that the dwindling population of elephants made his plans a fantasy. He was convinced that Ottoman authorities would not end the slave trade because, according to him, the Sudan was worthless with nothing of importance there. There was only one reason that Egypt occupied that country, and that was that it supplied slaves.⁹⁵ Baker and his wife were the couple that labelled Lake Albert, formerly Lake Mwitanzige, in 1864.

The British Foreign Office also believed that Egypt, as part of the Ottoman Empire, would do nothing to end the slave trade and the institution of slavery. To end slavery, first the slave trade would have to end. The Foreign Office felt that slavery was such a significant buttress to the social, political and economic systems that if the Empire suddenly halted it, there would be a collapse of those institutions. Moreover, the British policy toward the Ottoman Empire was to prevent such a collapse and maintain its integrity.⁹⁶

Writer Major F. Milligen, author of the 1869 book *Slavery in Turkey*, did note that 'Negroes' were participants in the slave trade as well. He also wrote that if customers in Mecca, Cairo or Constantinople were not bidding over slaves, 'the victorious Negro chiefs would let the vanquished go free'. What he did not say, although he was aware of it, was that Africans were provoked to war against each other to provide slaves.⁹⁷

An important subject associated with African slavery was the supposed sale of children by African parents. In his book about Turkey titled *The Evil of the East*, Kesnin Bey, who is obviously not a Turkophile, promoted that belief by stating, 'These poor fellows are victims of their parents' greed and of the idiotic barbarity of the Turks.'⁹⁸ In this interpretation, however, the Turks are implicated in the selling of children to advance his hatred. Still, that topic needed to be addressed.

That was an extremely important theme that Berlioux previously touched upon, the myth of parents selling their children. Dr Louis Frank, a French physician in Egypt when France occupied that country until 1801, carefully researched the topic of slavery. As others had concluded, slaves were victims of wars, victims of kidnappings, victims of man hunting (large group activity) or enslaved as punishment because of criminal activity. To his credit, Dr Frank addressed the belief that African parents had little affection for their children and would sell them for financial gain.

The idea, widespread in Europe, that fathers and mothers or relatives sell their children in the market to the highest bidder is absolutely false. They attach as much value to their children as do the most civilised nations. 'If you white men are capable of believing such absurd stories,' said a Negro to me one day, 'then you should not be astonished if, among ignorant people like us, so many absurd beliefs prevail about the character, manners, and customs of your nation. All animals are grieved when their young ones are taken from them; why would you rank us below all beasts?'⁹⁹

However, many Europeans did not believe in Black intelligence nor did they even understand the sources of Africans in the Ottoman Empire. Many were captured in their villages and towns in Central and West Africa but since they were labelled 'Ethiopians', writers such as Will Monroe attempted to 'whiten' many of them. This was probably a

tactic by which he and others could rationalize the fact that some captured Africans wielded a lot of power. According to him:

The Ethiopian of Turkey belong to the Abyssinian group of Semitic stock of the Eurafrican race. Their skin is dark brown, their hair is crisp, and they have some negro features, but they are not true negroes, but negroids, and represent a mixture of Arabic, Hebrew, and negro blood.¹⁰⁰

Writers such as Monroe further assumed that the eunuchs' operation, which he mistakenly said was done during infancy, affected the Africans both mentally and physically. According to him, it was the reason they became 'cunning, sly, cowardly, stupidly faithful, and absolutely treacherous'.¹⁰¹

Historian Madeline Zilfi, however, would disagree with Monroe's classification system of the 'Ethiopian'. According to her, that term was very fluid and based on phenotype and geography and therefore, that person was usually 'identified as *Zenc* or *Arap*'. Many were steered into work that was not only physically demanding but also was 'no friend to beauty or long life'.¹⁰²

African Slaves in Greece Under the Ottomans

Ottoman occupation of Greece introduced slaves from Africa, beginning in the early sixteenth century. Many of the Africans were Ethiopians from the southwestern Damot area and who reached Greece through the Sudan or through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. In 1676, Frenchman de la Guilletière wrote about a "black Eunuch" in Athens, a man of considerable standing, who served as the representative of the Kısar Agha, or chief black eunuch of the Ottoman Sultan in Constantinople'. The Kızlar Ağası at that time was Yüsuf Ağası, whose appointment began in 1671.

Most African slaves in Greece entered at Methoni, located on the western side of Peloponnesus, the peninsula that is the southern part of Greece. Many Turks in the area were engaged in the slave trade. They purchased the Africans at Benghazi and the Gulf of Sirte [Sidra] on the coast of Libya and sold them north as far as Bosnia. The largest group of African slaves in nineteenth-century Greece lived in Ioannina, located in Epirus, the northwestern part of Greece that borders the Ionian Sea.

The poet Lord Byron referred to those Africans in a letter to his mother and in his work, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In verses 56–58 he wrote about “slaves, eunuchs, soldiers [and] guests” within and without the palace and fort at “Yanina”.¹ British traveller T. S. Hughes also reported seeing eunuchs there in the early 1800s.

Other African slaves ended up in Crete, which the Ottomans occupied from 1645 to 1868. Frenchman V. Raulin visited Crete in 1845, noting the presence of both free and enslaved Africans. The slaves were domestic as well as agricultural workers. The free Africans had their own businesses and worked as launderers and labourers while some of the slave women became wives of Ottoman soldiers. Robert Pashley visited Crete while the Ottomans controlled it between the years 1645 to 1868. A British traveller Pashley noted both the presence and the sales on slaves who came through Benghazi.

Khania in Greece probably had the largest group of Africans who also created a settlement near the seashore. In 1886, British woman Mary Walker described ‘the little African colony’ as being “composed of small, square, flat-roofed houses,” but they also had a “small mosque” which occupied the centre of the settlement, while two nearby houses “belonging to brothers who had enriched themselves by their work, put forth some pretension to superiority”.² It obviously remained long after the Ottoman occupation.

Africans slaves also lived in Cyprus according to British consul Niven Kerr, who asserted that there were 2,000 of them in 1845. He reported that families of the highest rank had one or two of them in service. Although the traffic in slavery was to have ended the following year, it did not: ‘the traffic went on clandestinely’ and was ‘tolerated by the law.’ The traffic in slaves ‘increased’ in the early 1870s, the historian George Hill states. Subsequently, after the British occupation in 1878, cases of ‘runaway negresses’ were reported. Not long afterwards a British resident, Mrs Scott-Stevenson, saw ‘Nubian’ slaves on the island. Writing in 1880 that ‘some of them were the very blackest’ people she had ‘ever met’.

Mrs Scott-Stevenson also wrote that the men ‘were the servants of the higher class of Turks’. She did note the continuation of the slave trade, saying that the Africans seemed content to be with their masters, serving ‘from father to son’. They seemed well fed, clothed and contented, in her estimation.¹⁰³

Details of the Ottoman Slave Trade

After the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, they enslaved the local people. The sultan then located the city's slave market south of the famous Covered Bazaar (Kapalı Çarşı), near the İç Bedestan, the domed hall in its centre that was once a warehouse. The armies took '60,000 slaves from the Greek isthmus and over 200,000 from Serbia in the 1450s and 10,000 from Kiparissia on the Ionian Sea in the 1460s'. The armies herded them to Istanbul for sale along with Circassian, Caucasian and Polish slaves. They began to sell Africans as well.

Tax records reveal that in the 1550s, about 25,000 slaves were sold each year in the city, and in the seventeenth century, the average was 20,000. In the mid-1800s, between 11,000 and 13,000 slaves were shipped in from Africa each year with young black women dominating.¹⁰⁴

The sultan controlled a significant number of slaves, some of whom were 'administrators, soldiers, eunuchs, and women of the harem'. They numbered from about 20,000 in the 1400s to 100,000 by 1609. Almost 20 per cent of Istanbul's population was not free throughout the Ottoman times and they were mostly domestics. Others worked to produce luxury items, ran businesses and were labourers. During the Tanzimat or, reform movement, from 1839 until 1876, Sultan Abdülmecid I closed the public slave markets. The Empire eventually did ban slavery in 1909 but in fact it did not end until 1926 with the new constitution reforms of the Turkish Republic.¹⁰⁵

The enslavement of African eunuchs is coupled with Ottoman slavery and anti-slavery rules. Sultan Abdülhamid II did continue the anti-slavery policies of the Tanzimat and renewed the prohibition against slavery in 1877, but those who were already enslaved did not have to be freed. In 1889, he endorsed a special law allowing regular courts the authority to rule in the African slave trade, which was confirmed by the 1890 Anti-Slavery Conference of Brussels, ratified in 1891. Slave owners were urged to free slaves after a specified number of years and the escape of a slave could be condoned if that slave were improperly treated.¹⁰⁶

British prompting led to establishing guesthouses for manumitted slaves in Istanbul, Izmir, Tripoli, Benghazi, Jidda and Al-Hudayda (Yemen), where they would be fed, clothed and protected. The main house was in Izmir and from there the manumitted people were sent to the Vilayet in Aydin, where they were given farmland. They could also be sent to primary schools, naval schools or attached to military bands. Women were to be employed in Muslim homes and paid monthly. The people were to marry, build a small house, and were given one ox per family and farm tools. In 1882 it was determined that only married freedpeople were to be sent to Izmir and unmarried persons were to be settled where they were emancipated. There does not seem to be information about the success of that programme.

The British Foreign Office report of 1893 stated that much of the slave traffic had been eliminated. Other factors, however, were European incursions in Africa and the need for people there, plus increased internal pressures from within the Empire itself.¹⁰⁷

The Ottoman slave trade used both Europeans and Africans, plus people from India. One eleventh century Muslim, Ibn Butlan, wrote a guidebook that advised buyers of slaves on what to look for and how to avoid being cheated. He also described types of slaves and their ethnic origins, citing Nubian women as having 'ease and grace and delicacy':

In most Muslim societies, the Ottoman one included, slavery was closely associated with an African origin, or more plainly with darkness of skin. This was so despite the fact that among the subjects of the sultan there were not a few slaves of Circassian, Georgian, Greek and Slav extraction. The opposite was also true, actually more so, for almost all Africans in Ottoman society – and many in other Muslim societies – were slaves.¹⁰⁸

Although Muslims used most Black male slaves chiefly for physical work, they could also be soldiers. Women could be household servants such as cooks, maids and menials. Sometimes just the wealthy could afford slaves and, at other times, middle class families could manage to buy them as well. The Ottoman sultans had numerous slaves but many of them were gifts from those who curried favours or from those who wanted to express appreciation. Any African slave with particular abilities or who in some way seemed to be particularly fascinating,

hence the most valuable, might become a gift to the sultan for his harem. Ironically, it was probably 'the ascendancy of the Kızlar Ağası in the palace bureaucracy of the time must have had an impact upon recruitment'.¹⁰⁹

Morocco was an independent sultanate with ties to both the Ottomans and some European countries. However, it had more interest areas south toward the Senegal and Niger rivers where they attempted to 'establish a trans-Saharan kingdom based on gold and slaves'.¹¹⁰ Data is scanty on the numbers of West Africans caught up in the trans-Saharan slave trade. Estimates place the numbers at 8 million between 1500 and 1900. Another estimate is 9 million for the duration, with peak years between 900 and 1400. The trans-Atlantic slave trade took West African men over women by a 2:1 ratio. The trans-Saharan slave trade favoured women over men at the same ratio.¹¹¹ Most of the women were young and, if left in their communities, would probably have contributed to sustaining local populations.

Yet another person, Joseph Cooper of the British Anti-Slavery Society, reported after the Crimean War (1853–1856) that he believed 70,000 Africans a year were supplied to Turkey and Egypt. He also estimated that for each slave who reached the destination, 'five die *en route*, or are killed in savage warfare which takes place in the effort to capture them'.¹¹²

The Ottomans made a distinction between Ethiopian slaves and Black slaves, the latter from other African areas.¹¹³ Central African states such as 'Wadai [Chad], Baguirmi [Chad], Bornu [Nigeria], and the Upper Nile and Western Sudan were the main sources of Black slaves' for the Ottoman Empire through raids. Ethiopian slaves came from Galla and Sidama regions while White slaves came from Georgia and Circassia.

The Ottoman slave-trading system consisted of three elements: sources exporting slaves; major markets importing slaves; land and sea routes – dotted with central and peripheral entrepôts – linking sources to markets. Slaves were being traded throughout the network, so as also to supply local provincial markets on the road. Most of the sources lay outside Ottoman territory, but the other components of the system were under the Sultan's jurisdiction.¹¹⁴

The Ottomans received slaves through three following methods:

- (1) Acquisitions through capture in war.
- (2) Acquisitions by raiding and kidnapping, the latter unorganized, individual efforts.
- (3) Acquisitions by purchase without the element of compulsion.¹¹⁵

There were also British slaves in the Ottoman Empire. Many were sailors captured at sea and their numbers did not seem to be abundant. Under the reign of Sultan İbrahim in 1647 and 1648, British authorities noted a few of them in Istanbul. Tensions over enslaved British increased under the reign of Mehmed IV for in 1657, problems with runaway British slaves arose. If a British person saw an enslaved countryman, he could purchase the man. The problem occurred because certain ship captains allowed the slaves to find refuge on their vessels, which the Ottomans claimed was theft. The problem continued for at least another 200 years because during April 1856, shipmaster William Ell recorded that he had paid '\$315 for Thomas May, \$155 for Thomas Corte, \$225 for John Mills, and \$255 for Hen: Barnes [...]'. British authorities were very embarrassed that in the same communities in which they were conducting business, they could see Englishmen enslaved.¹¹⁶

Esma Durugönül, who earlier commented on the lack of material concerning Africans in Turkey, also explained a major reason why that still occurs. Foreign research institutions conducting the interpretations of Turkish history have led to 'the absence of the development of a homebred intellectual scientific potential with a rationalist, competitive and revisionist quality to oppose conservatism'. Those entities usually neglect people of African origin. Even today, accounts about them usually appear in journalist stories or in tourist guidebooks.¹¹⁷ In several cases, those who described Africans of the Ottoman Empire were foreigners and travelers.

There were some Ottoman women, such as Zeyneb Hanım and novelist Halide Edib Adıvar, who did describe their stereotypes of African slaves. The cannibalistic savage seemed to be their view of Africans. Zeyneb Hanım recorded that at age 15 she received a present of 'a little native from Central Africa' who seemed to hate wearing clothes

and who desired to return to the Lake Chad area so that she could eat another 'roasted European'. Halide Edib remembered that she was frightened of an African because she might be a cannibal. When the slave Resh  learned to speak Turkish, she informed Halide Edib that in Yemen someone told her that people in Constantinople loved to eat Abyssinians and she thought she would be killed and eaten at any moment. Because the Occident viewed Turks as inferiors and 'less white', defining Africans as being truly 'black' lessened the divide between the two. Cannibal myths helped to support that supposed inferiority and rationalize African slavery.¹¹⁸

Blacks as cannibals are part of Turkish folklore such as the wicked ones associated with I ci baba, or 'the man with the spindle'. Those characters also seduce men. In the tales called the 'Game of Ali Cengiz', a black cannibal kills the sultan's daughters one at a time and eats them because they cannot guess the answer to his riddles.¹¹⁹ These and similar tales of Blacks are examples of race prejudice.

In other Turkish folk tales Blacks (or Arabs) can be positive or negative characters such as when assuming the role of H zır, a saint who aids those in trouble. In other tales he is a merciless giant who might become the hero's servant or friend. Some tales have young royalty disguising themselves as Blacks to see if their sweethearts are faithful. If they are loved as Blacks, however, the young royalty reveal themselves not to be so, which pleases their mistresses more. In another related tale, the sultan's daughter must marry a Black but, when she accepts her fate, the man is transformed into a non-Black. Even if the Black is honourable, it still appears that to be white is better. Another example of an evil Black is the following:

This tells the terrible fate of a sultan's daughter who fell in love with a half-blind, raging Negro. As a punishment for her improper love, she becomes a nymphomaniac and turns even to monkeys. An old woman makes some medicine for her and causes two worms to come out of her body. One has come from the Negro and one from the monkeys. The worms are the explanation of her insatiable desire.¹²⁰

The descriptions of Africans have a long history in Muslim writings. Some of them depict Africans in very stereotypical ways,

justifying their enslavement. They were many times viewed as 'vicious, untruthful, and dishonest', as well as inferior. One Arab poet, al-Sayyid al-Himyarī – the South Arabian Himyarite Sayyid (723–89) wrote that Africans were ugly and smelled bad. Ibn Butlan, who was an eleventh-century Christian physician and theologian in Baghdad, wrote that Africans had rhythm and could dance well, stereotypes that exist in the United States today. He also said that the blacker the women were, the uglier they looked and the sharper their teeth were. In his opinion, 'They can endure work [...] but there is no pleasure to be got from them, because of the smell of their armpits and the coarseness of their bodies.' Ottoman erotic poet Fazıl Bey (ca. 1757–1810) differentiated Ethiopians from other Africans and wrote that it was foolish to make love to Africans when Whites were available. In addition, he said that it was unwise to elevate those who were meant only to be servants.¹²¹

Ibn Butlan wrote a guidebook on the purchase of African slaves that some early Ottomans appear to have used. The descriptions are, of course, stereotypes of various African ethnic groups but slavers used them as predictors of behaviour and attitudes, plus for weighting standards of beauty.¹²²

[T]he Zagawa [Muslim, Zaghawa from Chad and the Sudan] were considered the worst by Ibn Butlan. They were vicious and ill-natured grumblers, useless for pleasure, and did terrible things. From the country between Nubia and Ethiopia, the Beja [Muslim, Bega], however, were golden, beautiful, smooth, tender and brave: but they also stole. Ranked above all of them (even the Indians, who were prone to catch diseases) were the Nubians. They were tender and possessed delicacy, were pure but firm and religious and combined chastity with submissiveness.

Muslim literature occasionally reinforced the idea that Africans should be slaves. Other stereotypes characterize Africans as monsters and having 'unbridled sexuality'.¹²³ As in the English language, the colour white became associated with good and joy while the colour black became associated with evil and gloom. African slaves (Negresses) did the hardest work in the Ottoman harems, cleaning the walls, the floors and the passageways.¹²⁴

Descriptions of eunuchs became incorporated in stereotypes of Africans. For instance, one writer described twentieth-century Chief Black Eunuch Cevher Ağa as 'a huge, swollen, balloon-like creature of extraordinary stature [...]'.¹²⁵ Eunuchs also supposedly lacked body hair, had feminine voices, were fat and had ugly wrinkling of the skin in later life. Castration also united 'the small brain of the Negro with the childish imagination of the ignorant Oriental'.¹²⁶

Africans in Islamic art had a propensity to reflect the images in literature. Again, those images tended to support the view that Africans were supposed to be enslaved, justifying Ottoman slavery to some. Still, some Ottoman art did not portray Africans negatively. An example is from a text dated approximately 1594 that portrays the life of the Prophet:

Among the many personalities who figure in the biography of the Prophet, two are identified as black and depicted accordingly. One of them is the emperor of Ethiopia [...] who gave shelter to some of Mohammed's Companions when they fled from Mecca to escape the persecution of the reigning pagan oligarchy [...] Another figure of almost demiurgic importance is the famous Bilal the first muezzin [crier of calls to prayer] and a Companion of the Prophet. Some minor black figures, apparently slaves, also appear in these pictures.¹²⁷

In images of special celebrations of the Ottoman court, Africans appear simply as slaves and servants. Most are men who were 'carrying a tray, pushing a broom, leading a horse, wielding a spade, pulling an oar or a rope, or discharging some other subordinate or menial task'.¹²⁸ Though the depictions of those Africans were not negative per se, artists still portrayed them as performing lower-level jobs, indicating inferior status. Although the general negative depiction of Africans cannot be blamed entirely for their slavery, it would seem as if it helped to support and sustain that institution.

Since agricultural slavery was never widespread in the Ottoman Empire and slaves for the military were greatly reduced, during the nineteenth century most slaves were used in royal and upper class households. Termed 'harem-slavery', it required 10,000 slaves a year and the majority, mostly women, came from Africa. The majority of the

women were menials, except for Ethiopian women, who went to 'middle-class harems as concubines and wives'.¹²⁹ Some people believed that Ethiopian women had secret sexual powers.

When Sultan Murad III (1574–1595) was on the throne, 'even Turks of moderate means, had a negro slave who cleaned and cooked meals over a charcoal fire, fanning the red glow with a turkey's wing'. There was no problem with obtaining servants, for the slave market in Constantinople opened from 8:00 am until about noon except on Friday. The market stood behind a large wooden gate and held a courtyard 'surrounded by small chambers (and a coffee shop for would-be purchasers who liked to dawdle)'.

This was the slave market for 'domestic servants', mostly negresses, whose teeth, muscles, legs were examined with the methodical attention of a horse-trader. It was, of course, quite another matter to purchase a beautiful Georgian or Circassian girl as a mistress, for the best were inevitably snapped up for the Sultan, and indeed there was such a shortage that the Circassians, so it is said, soon had to start their own slave farms where 'they grew beautiful women as other countries might grow wheat or cattle – for sale'.¹³⁰

By the reign of Selim III (1789–1807), the harem women of the Topkapı Palace came from the Caucasus and were mostly Georgians and Circassians. The slave market at that time was located on the seventh hill at the ancient Forum of Arcadius, now the Column of Arcadius. The Avrat Pazarı or, Female Slave Market, also held slaves from Egypt and Abyssinia for the Friday morning sales. The latter were used as domestics and menials.¹³¹ Although the public sale of slaves faded in the 1840s, private sales continued until World War I.

The Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the early 1800s strangled but did not completely excise the supposed finest supply of slaves for the Ottomans. That demise would lead to higher prices and a greater demand for African slaves. Officer and writer Charles White visited the Istanbul slave market in the mid-nineteenth century, which at that time was located in the area of the Constantine's Column, constructed in AD 320. White, who wrote *Three Years in Constantinople*, published in 1845, reported that the market opened from 8:00 am until noon every day

except Friday. One end of the market was extremely run down but in the centre of the market square there was a small mosque. He described the merchants sipping coffee on raised platforms and the separation of the women from the men. He noted the former were clothed and kept in private rooms. At the front of the mosque, he saw African men and, behind them, White men. On the east side of the mosque were recently imported African women who, compared to the others, were relatively inexpensive because they had not yet received training. After training, the cost of the African women would increase. Still, of the women, only the African slaves were on public display.¹³²

In his book *The Companion Guide to Istanbul*, John Freely also wrote about an area near Constantine's Column on the street now called Vezirhanı Caddesi, named after the Vezir Hanı built in 1659–1660. The han (caravansary or commercial building) consisted of a hostel for travelling merchants, stables for animals, warehouses and shops for selling and storing goods. It also served as a slave market and was probably the same site that Charles White visited, for it is also near a mosque, the Nuruosmaniye Camii, or the Mosque of the Sacred Light, completed by Sultan Osman III.¹³³ Further, an undated tinted print titled 'The Mosque of Osmanié (From the Slave Market)' clearly shows Africans in the slave market with the mosque in the near background.¹³⁴

When traveller Albert Smith visited the slave market in the Turkish city of Smyrna (renamed Izmir), the day before he arrived in Constantinople, he gave a vivid description of the Africans he saw in that port city. He would later write of a market in the latter city as well. Smith recorded that it was in a courtyard with a tree in the centre, but gave no other physical descriptions. He noted that there was almost no compassion in his party for the slaves and, further, the Americans in the group thought that if a slave and an elephant were placed side-by-side, they believed that the elephant would have more intelligence. Smith wrote the following bleak account about the small group of Africans, as he observed two Black men, a Black woman with a male baby, and a little boy who had 'squatted down together in the fierce sun, until their brains must almost have dried up and rattled, like nuts, in their skulls. The men grinned at us, and held out their hands for money; the woman took no notice, but continued unconcernedly nursing her baby; and the boy nestled in the dust, and played with it.'¹³⁵

Writer Frederick Milligen, in his report to the Anthropological Society of London, wrote about the slave markets of Istanbul in 1869. He wrote that 20 years before, slaves were sold at an imperial market but currently, the Turks 'have continued the trade in an underhand way'. Unofficial markets opened near 'Sultan Mehmed in Tophaneh [Tophane]', as well as in 'some of the cafes and shops of Stambul'. He might have been referring to the Nusretiye Mosque, built in the 1820s by Mahmud II. At the time of his commentary, he pinpointed a slave market opposite the grand Süleymaniye Mosque above the Golden Horn and in the Teriaki-tcharshisi bazaar, 'the third shop to the left'. The site today is called the Tiryaki Çarşısı or, the Market of the Addicts and is located south of the mosque. Apparently, the cafes used to sell opium with the tea, tobacco and coffee.

After 1847, the same year that slavery was first banned in Istanbul, the treaty between Britain and Zanzibar halted slaves from the latter region, making Ethiopia a major supplier. In fact, it appeared that slavery continued, for on 9 November 1884, the British boarded the *Malika*, the private steamer of the Sultan of Zanzibar and found eight young slaves. Six were Ethiopian boys and four of those were eunuchs, plus there were two Circassian girls, all purchased in Istanbul. Ethiopian rulers charged tolls to those taking slaves through their lands and used the money to buy arms for empire expansion. Menelek, who became king following the death of Yohannes in 1889, used those arms that he acquired to defeat the Italians in 1896. At that time 'slaves could be carried across the Red Sea to Arabia and on to the Persian Gulf and Iraq, in spite of British attempts to halt the trade by naval action on the Red Sea'.¹³⁶

Most of the observations of the Ottoman slave markets, particularly in Istanbul, came from visitors that included writer and painter Nicholas de Nicolay (early 1500s), diplomat Philippe du Fresne-Canaye (1573), Robert Withers (early seventeenth century), William Lithgow (1610), Louis Deshayes (1621), officer and writer Charles White (1830), traveller and writer Miss Julia Pardoe (1836), G. L. Dawson-Danner (1840?), Edmond Spencer (1839) and Robert Mantran (1860s). Unfortunately, there is scant information that the tourists recorded revealing how the markets functioned. That is because they seemed to go there for other purposes.

It seems that there were certain 'tourist attractions' which every visitor left compelled to see – today they are the Topkapı Palace, the museum of St. Sophia, and the blue Mosque; during the Ottoman period it was the slave market of Istanbul.¹³⁷

From the 1700s through the early 1800s, Istanbul was part of 'The Grand Tour', when young rich men traveled Europe for two or three years. Supposedly for educational purposes, the actual reasons were for power and pleasure as well. Paintings, drawings and its healthy climate had the rich and others who could afford to travel flocking to Ottoman Istanbul. Future European leaders, poets such as Lord Byron and even the infamous Casanova visited the city. The pleasures they sought included women.¹³⁸

Because of the restrictions upon Muslim women, the men could enjoy themselves with Christian women who they hired for a month at a time through an arrangement called 'marriage à cabin'. The phrase stems from the Turkish word 'kabin' (cabin or changing booth) for a temporary marriage. Many men spent a large amount of their Grand Tour with those prostitutes. Another allure was the slave markets. Lord Charlemont, then 21 years old, said that it was the duty of travellers to see everything, and that included the brothels. He reported that the women were either Christians or Jews and that many of them 'are extremely beautiful and well-skilled in all the necessary arts and allurements of their calling'. In the eighteenth century, the best brothel was next to the British embassy.¹³⁹

For some travellers, 'the most interesting aspect of the Istanbul slave market was the nudity of the merchandise and the methods used by buyers to examine the slaves'. Many, but not all, became upset largely by what they witnessed. One European said that he felt discriminated against because Christians could not purchase them. Some regretted that they could not buy Christian slaves and free them, but one has to wonder about their real intentions. Travel literature reports that when Europeans somehow did buy slaves and take them home, they arrived 'not as freemen, but as servants or worse'.¹⁴⁰

One part of the Ottoman Empire that did allow Europeans to own slaves was Egypt. The famous traveller James Burton owned three slave women, one an Ethiopian. Burton's friends suggested that the reason they purchased Greek and Cretan girls was to 'save them from abuse by

the Turks'. Of course, the actual reason was pleasure. One of his friends, a Joseph Bonomi, held a slave girl named Fatima for several years. When he returned to England, he ignored her letters asking for support in raising their child.

The English appear to have looked upon buying slaves as being part of the lifestyle of an upper class Turk. Copying the practice, they believed, would help their assimilation into Egyptian society by maintaining the higher rank associated with ownership. Burton clearly enjoyed the idea of slave ownership; otherwise, he would not have made his purchase so soon after his arrival in the country.¹⁴¹

White estimated that the market sold 300 slaves a day. The customer also had to pay a tax upon purchase and the tax on the White slave female slaves was higher than that of the Africans. The White female slaves might sell for three times the amount of African female slaves and eight times as much if they were exceptionally beautiful and educated. After purchase, a slave was entitled to have a contract drawn up.

This would specify, first, that she could neither be hired out nor leased and, in theory, she could not be resold without her consent. In practice, slaves were sold and they could be married to whomever a master chose. The men could prepare for manumission and buy property; they could even set up in business but each was responsible for his own debts. If the slave died childless, the master took everything that he had left. Some slaves were bought to perform particular tasks which, when discharged, meant that they were set free. Few women were able to follow such routes to freedom and manumission, after about a dozen years.¹⁴²

Slaves could be killed with impunity for any offence and the owner's punishment was slight, even for the wanton killing of a slave. The owner could give, sell or marry a slave to whomever he wished, although he could not separate a husband and wife. Since slaves were property, the theft of a slave child was a crime while the theft of a free child was not.¹⁴³

The abolishment of the slave market in Istanbul occurred in 1847, but it did not stop as much as it continued on a clandestine basis. On his month-long visit to Constantinople in 1849, Albert Smith wrote about the slaves that he saw in late summer. He noted that slave merchants kept Circassian and Georgian slaves in private houses that restricted admission. The major spot for African slaves, however, was in a courtyard attached to Süleyman mosque, the grandest religious structure built by the famous architect Mimar Sinan (1489–1566), responsible for over 300 buildings. Smith saw ‘a great many women and children grouped about in the court-yard’, but although it was apparent that he was sympathetic to their plight, he did not think very highly of them as human beings.¹⁴⁴ In larger houses and palaces, African women slaves were purchased for drudgework.

Sultan Abdülmecid I (1839–1861), on a ceremonial visit to the Porte, which was the seat of the Grand Vizier, met with the *Miclis-i Umumi*, or General Council. The council was reviewing proposed legislation for the sultan’s ratification. The sultan brought up the Istanbul slave markets because he heard about the mistreatment of slaves and so ordered the end of the open slave market in Istanbul.¹⁴⁵ The British hailed the sultan’s decision, but it did little to stem slave sales. Sales took place in homes of dealers and in other places outside the purview of foreigners, particularly the British. African slaves were sold, supposedly, in Fatih while White slaves were sold in Tophane (Bursa) and Karabaş. The reign of Sultan Abdülmecid I began the reform period or ordering of the empire known as *Tanzimat* (1839) and ended with the reign of his successor, Abdül Aziz (1876). That period saw Ottoman citizens gaining basic rights and the institution of other state reforms. The reforms were supposed to centralize the government as in Western countries and establish equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, among other proposed restructurings. Because of opposition from religious leaders, the *Tanzimat* only introduced a dual system composed of the religious and the secular.

Perhaps no issue during the *Tanzimat* so clearly pitted Ottoman against Western culture as slavery did. That moral flagship of Britain’s civilising mission sailed with all its zeal toward the Ottoman horizon, proudly flying its glorious colours. Curiously enough, however, the two ‘fleets’ never really met. [...] Ottoman

slavery and slave trade were never seriously debated, either on the political or on the intellectual plane. It was as if one party barged in fully armed with moral, economic, social, and political arguments, imbued with a strong sense of justice, while the other timidly turned its back, refusing to engage in a dialogue, claiming that there was basically no common ground, no common language, no frame of reference through which a true discussion could take place.¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, in September 1854, the Grand Vizier and the Council of Ministers ordered the police to prevent public slave trading. They noted that there were sales in most of the streets of Istanbul, as well as in Galata and Beyoğlu. It was also in 1854 that the sultan issued a ferman or edict that read, 'Man is the most noble of all the creatures God has formed, in making him free; selling people as animals, or articles of furniture, is contrary to the will of the Sovereign Creator.' The Council of State ordered the immediate cessation of all public slave trading in January 1877, which had reemerged in Fatih and in other parts of the capital.¹⁴⁷

In the nineteenth century, slaveholding in the Ottoman Empire was an urban phenomenon, particularly in the cities of Rumelia, Anatolia, the Balkans and the Levant. The majority of purchases and sales occurred in Istanbul.¹⁴⁸ Some took place in public *hani* (large commercial buildings) if conducted in cities and in *caravanserais* (inns with a large courtyard) along main trading routes. In 1880 Hudayda there were 200 slave dealers operating out of their homes, holding no more than three slaves each. If the police came to inquire, which was not a great problem, the dealers introduced the slaves as domestic servants. Authorities knew who the slave traders were.¹⁴⁹ Buyers could come from all social classes.

At the end of the road, often but not always in markets, waited the buyers. They came from almost all walks of life, but were mostly city dwellers. More slaves were owned by the upper and middle classes than by the lower classes. Fairly large segments of the population could afford to and did own a black domestic slave for menial work, but white harem slavery was practiced almost exclusively by the well to do. In regions lying closer to the sources of African slaves – such as Tripoli, Egypt, Arabia, and the Persian

Gulf – slave holding was common even among the lower classes. Slaves there were cheaper.¹⁵⁰

Many of the slaves worked in commerce and manufacturing but most were in domestic service. Slaves in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Bursa, the Ottoman Empire's first capital, worked for silk manufacturers and merchants and, after a certain specified time, were freed and set up in their own businesses. A decline of silk manufacturing in Bursa during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries 'probably led to the gradual disappearances of slaves and manumitted slaves from this branch of production'. In Cairo, however, the slave system in that industry continued through the seventeenth century because of a period of prosperity. The domestic slaves made it possible for the households of the rich to function. Some owners freed a woman slave and married her. Subsequently freedwomen, one can now identify them in the estate inventories by 'the patronymic 'b. Abdullah'.' Some of them received mention in the pious foundations (*awqaf*), explained later.¹⁵¹

Slave traders in the Ottoman Empire also came from all social classes. Some of them were individuals who bought slaves while travelling through areas that maintained slavery. Pilgrims to Mecca and Medina, army officers and travelling administrators were significant participants, as were people who sold slaves to help to pay for vacation expenses. Professional slavers were very organized and dealt in large numbers. Before 1857, when the Ottoman Empire officially prohibited the traffic in African slaves (although it continued unofficially until the 1890s), they would travel from Istanbul to sub-Saharan Africa to purchase slaves, then return and sell them. Some dealt with thousands of slaves annually, while most sold only small numbers. Dealers represented many ethnicities and seemed restricted to Muslims.

Natives of the Arabian Peninsula dominated the slave trade by sea from East Africa, and the *Dunqulawis* controlled the overland traffic to the coasts of Somali and Eritrea. Turks, Albanians, and Arabs had the Mediterranean trade; North African Arabs and *Tilboo* and *Tuareg* tribesmen shared most of the trans-Saharan traffic. *Circassians*, *Georgians*, *Lâz*, and *Turks* traded in white slaves. *Hadrami* dealers were often mentioned in connexion with the Red Sea trade. They numbered 2,000 in Jidda alone in the

1850s, were heavily armed and deeply resentful of British efforts to interfere with their activities. And in the port towns of East Africa, Arabia, and the gulf, Gujerati Indian traders – better known as Bayans – were involved in the financial side. Iranian slave dealers were said to be active in Egypt in the early 1870s. A Maltese British subject was tried in 1849 for slave dealing in Benghazi, and other Maltese merchants were later implicated in the Tripoli traffic.¹⁵²

While most of the dealers were men, significant numbers were women. In Istanbul, one source maintained that women traders were in the majority, some of whom accompanied the slaves from Tripoli to Istanbul. Information about the Istanbul slave dealers guild from the mid-seventeenth century, including their names, indicates otherwise, at least during that period. The slave market (*esir pazarı*) in Istanbul had about 2,000 slave dealers. Most of them were watchmen, gatekeepers and apprentices while only 39 were government-approved dealers and only seven of the latter were women. There were also 17 registered hawkers and 400 were market officials ‘in charge of maintaining decorum and order’. Although there were reports that most or all members of the Istanbul guild were Jews, all of the dealers and hawkers were Muslim.

First, of the slave dealers themselves, none were non-Muslims and only one person appears to have been a convert to Islam (the one with the patronymic Abdullah). In addition, two had made the pilgrimage to Mecca [...]. One was a dervish (the Dede) [...]. Of the hawkers, five were converts to Islam and three had made the pilgrimage; one was an Albanian and so identified.¹⁵³

Police there closely watched the men during the 1880s, but did not interfere with the women. Between 1881 and 1884, the Second Dragoman (interpreter) of the British Empire reported 42 dealers in Istanbul, and noted that 14 of them were women. One writer recorded not only the roles of women in the slave trade, but also revealed some of their identities.

As soon as a fresh arrival of girls takes place at the residence of one of these slave dealers, a number of brokers, generally women, are

dispatched to the houses of the amateur slave-dealers, who are none else than the grand ladies of the imperial palace and the high aristocracy of Constantinople – the wives of Ali Paşa, Fouad Paşa, Hussein Paşa, and of all the big and small paşas of the empire. These amateur dealers, on receiving the intelligence from the brokers, have either the slaves brought to them or drive in their carriages to the house of the professional slave dealer, and there, after examination, conclude the bargain. The grand lady who has bought the Circassian girl on speculation, takes the slave to her palace, where she is kept three or four years, so as to render her familiar with the Turkish idiom, and teach her the duties of the household; some ladies go even so far as to make the slave girl practice a little on the piano, a requirement which serves to increase a good deal the price of the merchandise.¹⁵⁴

There was also an active market for African female slaves, though there has not been as much written about that group. Ottaviano Bon, the Venetian representative to the sultan, provided some insight into that subject. As with the eunuchs, their value seemed to correspond to their lack of perceived beauty. The ‘uglier’ they were the higher their value.

The Black-moor girls, are no sooner brought into the Seraglio after their arrival at Constantinople (for they come by ship from Cairo, and thereabouts) but they are carried to the women’s lodgings; where they are brought up, and made fit for all services: and by how much the more ugly and deformed they are, by so much the more they are valued and esteemed of by the Sultanas. Wherefore the Bashaw (Paşa) of Cairo, who for the most part sends them all, is always diligent to get the most ill-favoured, coal-black, and flat-nosed girls, that may be had throughout all Egypt, or the countries bordering on it, to send them for presents to the Grand Signor, who bestows them upon his women.¹⁵⁵

Although ‘ugliness’ is supposed to have been one reason that Africans were valued, it might not be the main explanation. The Black eunuchs displaced the White eunuchs in the palace, and ‘ugliness’ was supposed to have been one of the rationales as well. The women of the harem were not supposed to have become enamored with the unattractive Africans.

However, Russian encroachment on the Caucasus that reduced the numbers of possible slaves probably caused the change. White slaves became less available.¹⁵⁶

As writer Murray Gordon revealed, when one travels through the countries of the Arab world, one sees Arabs with a range of skin pigmentation. In the city of Istanbul, the seat of the former Ottoman Empire and where there were slave markets, a traveller today might notice some slight pigment variation, but not a lot of darker tones. With the numbers of African women brought to the Ottoman Empire, one would expect slightly more disparity. Gordon provided a clue to that mystery that challenges the arguments of shorter life expectancies and low fertility rates.

In Constantinople, the seat of the Ottoman Empire, where it was a commonplace for Turkish gentlemen to have numerous concubines, it was rare to see a mulatto. The offspring of such relationships generally fell victim to infanticide which, according to one report of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the organ of the British Anti-Slavery Society (that appeared on September 1, 1856), was widely practiced in Stamboul 'as a matter of course and without the least remorse or dread.'¹⁵⁷

To sell slaves, there has to be a market and the women devised a number of schemes to ensure would-be buyers knew that they had new 'merchandise'. One of them drove through the streets of Istanbul 'with their lovely slaves seated before them in the carriage; of course nothing is neglected which can contribute to show the female slaves to advantage, neither the most fashionable costumes nor the most transparent veils. On driving home, the lady expects to find several customers in attendance waiting to learn the price of her slaves.'¹⁵⁸

Much like other trades, the slave dealers were members of a guild. In Istanbul, a highly organized *Shaykh* and a *Kethüdâ* (warden) regulated them.¹⁵⁹ Ottoman records show the existence of the guilds:

Early in 1862, the Minister of Police himself asked the Kethüdâ of the guild in Istanbul to estimate the value of a female slave whose freedom the government had decided to purchase out of humanitarian considerations. In 1864 the existence of the guild

was mentioned again in the course of an investigation into a case of ill treatment of a female slave by one of the guild's members in the capital. In the early 1870s a number of reports reached the Central Government containing allegations that slave dealers in Silvas, Konya, Kastamonu, Trabzon, and Sinop were secretly organising illegal associations. Although no further details are provided, this could be an indication of the guilds' clandestine activities following the government's attempt to control the Circassian and Georgian traffic to the above-mentioned areas.¹⁶⁰

Another group of slave-owners were those who were themselves slaves. Unlike the trans-Atlantic system that would envelope the 'New World', a few Ottoman slaves were sometimes large slave-owners as well, a situation that was not restricted to slaves in the imperial palace. Chief eunuchs might have their own chattel in the sultan's palace, where the sultan had his own slaves. Those chattel were 'slaves owned by another master who himself was a slave of the sultan'. When Chief White Eunuch (Kapı Ağası or, Bâbüssâde Ağâ) Cafer Ağâ died in 1557, documents revealed that he owned 156 slaves. Thirteen of them were already working in the imperial palace while the sultan ordered 39 young boys taken into the palace upon Cafer Ağâ's death. The remaining slaves petitioned the sultan for consideration of employment in the palace. The sultan reviewed the list to determine what departments should obtain which slaves.¹⁶¹

Because of the lack of complete records, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of slaves in the Ottoman Empire. There are a limited number of documents from the British, Americans and French, as well as from the Ottomans themselves. There are some records by observers, but they did not take accurate counts. Numbers of slaves would fluctuate because of availability, political and economic factors and other reasons. During the nineteenth century, the following report reflects estimates of the slave trade to the Ottoman Empire:

If we centre on the third quarter of the nineteenth century as the period during which the slave trade to the Ottoman Empire was at its peak, we may venture to suggest the following, very tentative conclusions: exports from the Vilâyet of Tripoli were probably around the level of 2,000 slaves per annum; imports into the

Ottoman ports of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were approximately 7,000 slaves a year, with 4,000–5,000 going to the Hejaz and Yemen and the rest to the Gulf; exports from Egypt could have amounted to about 1,000–2,000 slaves a year, though it increased during the migration of the 1860s. Thus, the volume of the Ottoman slave trade, excluding Egypt's internal traffic, was probably around 11,000 a year and is unlikely to have exceeded 13,000.¹⁶²

Other estimates of Red Sea slaves exported from the port of Massawa in the first half of the nineteenth century range from 600 to 3,000 a year, but all of them did not go to the Ottoman Empire. One person believed that during the first decade of the century, the numbers dropped to about 1,000 persons a year. Another in the 1830s believed the numbers to have been 2,000 at that time while a contemporary, using official figures, put it at 600, 'mainly Gallas [Oromo, mostly Muslim], of whom he thought would be 100 eunuchs, 200 boys and 300 girls'. The French consul at Massawa made two estimates. In 1845, he stated that 1,600 slaves were exported, 'made up of 1,000 slaves captured in war, 300 Galla girls, mainly 12 to 13 years old, 200 Shanqellas [Ethiopian Shankellas], 100 kidnapped Christian children, and 100 eunuchs'. In his next report he estimated that 2,500 slaves were exported each year, '1,000 prisoners of war, 800 Galla girls from ages 10 to 13, 300 Galla boys of the same age, 200 Shanqellas, 100 kidnapped Christian children, and 100 eunuchs'.¹⁶³

Estimates also varied regarding the numbers of slaves exported from other areas. During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, approximately 1,750 left Massawa, 1,500 from Beilul, 6,000 from Tajura and Zeila, 17,000 from the Sudan frontier and 350 from other areas. Those figures do not include slaves from other ports. At over 25,000 slaves exported annually, between 1800 and 1850, 1.25 million slaves were exported or, 2.5 million per century.¹⁶⁴ Many of those slaves ended up in areas governed by the Ottoman Empire because of the approximately 200-year Ottoman occupation of Massawa.

One topic of the Red Sea eunuch trade that has received little attention is deaths. Not only did slavers take people, but also many people died or their captors killed them, purposely or accidentally, in this particular trafficking. Although numbers are difficult to

approximate, one writer has estimated that deaths involving the Arab trade in Black eunuchs for Islam's harems to have been 250,000 persons. These numbers do not include those who died before AD 1100.¹⁶⁵

In his book on Ottoman Turkey, Ösman Bey estimated that there were about 30,000 African slaves in Istanbul, calculated from personal observation. There were about 60,000 Muslim households in the city and he believed that every two households had one slave.¹⁶⁶ Most of them, again according to the author, were women used for domestic service in harems. He noted that, except for eunuchs, there was not a great need for male slaves in the city. In the countryside, Africans supervised workers in the fields:

Eunuchs form, however, an exception, they being highly thought of; the Sultan of Turkey, the Sultan of Morocco, the Khedive of Egypt, all of them possess a staff composed of several hundred eunuchs, who are expected to fulfil the duties of guardian angels of the harem. The grandees of those different courts also employ these wretched beings with just as much ostentation as a European aristocrat prides himself on his chasseur's feather cap.¹⁶⁷

Eunuchs served royal households and homes of Moroccan officials. According to an 1847 report, the Sultan of Morocco imported eunuchs from Egypt. Another report from the 1880s indicated that a factory at Mesfioua prepared them for export. The sultan was one of the largest owners of domestic slaves in his country, receiving many of them as gifts by regional governors and others. As in other areas of the world that sanctioned slavery, Moroccans viewed the number of slaves a person owned as a sign of prestige.¹⁶⁸

In Istanbul, according to Ösman Bey, during the 1840s the African slaves were placed in the imperial slave market. By the 1860s, that open display of selling of slaves was no longer tolerated. It did not mean the end of the buying or selling of slaves, though. The Turks did it in a more clandestine way, as previously recorded in the writings of Frederick Milligen:

Non-official markets were then opened at Sultan-Mehmed, at Tophane, and in some of the cafés and shops of Stamboul. One of these places is opposite the mosque of Süleymaniye in the bazaar

named Teriaki-tcharshisi, the third shop to the left, looking westward, if my memory does not fail me. In these markets slaves are sold daily, the hours of brisk business being from eight to twelve a.m., Turkish time. Up to A.D. 1869, this state of things was in existence.¹⁶⁹

Ösman Bey continued with his description about the disbursal of slaves, particularly females. There was a classification system based on perceptions of beauty. He reported that 'the thirty or forty girls that come on the market at the same period, all find customers quickly enough'. Then he explained hierarchy of demand. The Abyssinians were the first to be sold because of their 'good looks' and were 'taken as upper servants in the harems of those whose limited means forbid them to indulge in a thorough-bred Circassian'. The lower class of amateurs bought Abyssinians as cheap odalisques. The 'genuine negro girls with flat noses and thick lips' were destined to do kitchen work and the common housework.¹⁷⁰

As the African slave trade decreased in the 1850s and 1860s, the trade in Circassian women and girls did not. Harem-slavery continued although the British protested. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Imperial Harem had between 400 and 500 slaves, mostly Circassians.¹⁷¹ It appeared that many people believed the Circassian, Georgian and Abkhasian mountain woman were descendants of Amazon women. Still the Circassian slave women, as well as others, not only suffered mistreatment, but might also suffer from pregnancy or have children by their owner that they would have to raise on their own. Others might have to suffer continuously from the fury of the master's wife:

In the generality of cases the lot awaiting the Circassian slaves is not as happy as might be expected. And how could it be otherwise, when seclusion, jealousy, and profligacy render domestic happiness an impossibility? Besides this, the Circassian woman, whether wife or concubine, is always awkwardly situated in the midst of Turkish society. Exposed as she is to the hostile feelings of the native women, she cannot well rely on the capricious and fickle disposition of her husband or master. As for the concubines, they are the natural antagonists of the wives; the war waged between

them frequently is attended with serious results; many of them, worn out and emaciated, die of consumption, and cases of violent death put an end to the life of others.¹⁷²

Unlike others who idealized the lives of the African slaves, Ösman Bey reported that only a few had good, kind-hearted masters. He does note that members of the households loved some slaves and sometimes freed them or cared for them in old age. Those owners properly fed and clothed the women while most slaves led a harsh life:

As a rule, the lot attending these creatures is sad. They pass through the hands of ten or twenty masters, who make them lead the life of cab-horses, beat them at intervals, and at last sell them. Such treatment irritates the temper and inflames the passions of the African destitute, who, driven to despair, becomes a fury, wages war against her oppressors, and ends by becoming a hater of the white species. It is not to be wondered, then, if negroes have often been known to set fire to the wooden houses of Stamboul, as being the best means of retaliation they could devise.¹⁷³

Major Frederick Milligen read a paper before the Anthropological Society of London in 1870 and much of what he said is contained in the writing of Ösman Bey. It is obvious that one person 'borrowed' from the other in many places. His information and observations seem current as of 1869. Milligen reported that Istanbul had a greater 'variety of specimens of the human race' than any other place on earth. The Africans, he reported, were the most conspicuous 'on account of both the tint and the numbers of its members'. One could not travel through the city without 'meeting a negro, whether male or female'. Milligen wanted to know the number of African inhabitants of the city but ran into difficulty. In the census of 1864, there was no distinction made between African and White women. Still, he estimated the African population at about 30,000. He believed that most were from Africa, arriving between the ages of ten and 25.

Milligen provided his insights as to why the trade in Africans continued and noted that Turkey and the United States fueled the demand for slaves. However, America had 'withdrawn from competition' while Turkey continued the practice. If there were no customers in Cairo,

Mecca or Istanbul, Africans would not be selling each other into slavery. Unlike some other historians, Milligen finds countries outside Africa complicit in the continuing business of slavery.

To bolster his argument, Milligen used the example of the African female cook. According to him, such a slave would cost £75 while a free woman who was a cook could demand a wage of £15 a year. It would be more economical to purchase an African slave cook than hire one because in five years, the slave would have made up for her purchase price.

As with other investigators, Milligen was also interested in the source of the slaves. He surmised the following after interviewing some Africans, and his conclusions are consistent with the findings of others:¹⁷⁴

[...] they will invariably mention Kordofan, Darfur, Dangola or Abyssinia. The valley of the Nile is not, however, the only outlet of slavery, as many slaves are exported eastward to the market places of Arabia, while numbers cross the great Sarah [Sahara] and reach Tripoli or Barbary, and the frontiers of Tunis and Morocco.¹⁷⁵

The hard work and mistreatment wore out many Africans to the extent that they 'were not even worth feeding'. Turned loose in the streets, the women turned to begging to stay alive. Before being tossed out in the street, some did manage to save a little money while others managed to steal money and hide it.¹⁷⁶ For self-help, free Africans organized brotherhoods or guilds. There were a number of lodges over which chiefs (*Col-bashi*, or, chief of the band) held authority. Lodge members elected the chief.

The aim of the lodges was to provide 'protection, aid and refuge to the slaves when in want, to rescue and redeem them from the hands of their proprietors when possible, to claim and defend the rights of free negroes whether from their employers or before the tribunals, and lastly, in order to provide a place for general meetings'. Each lodge member paid a monthly donation, plus he or she bought to the lodge 'what can be stolen from the White man's house'. That shared relationship united the various lodges.¹⁷⁷

Some exclusively female informal networks assisted freed women by providing minimal food and shelter. Nes'et Kadın, a resident of Istanbul's Kasap Ilyas neighbourhood, is just one example of a person

heading such an organisation. The census of 1885 listed her age as 50 years old and a Kolbaşı, the head of the informal network. At that time, she lived in a household with her son plus seven women ranging in age from 15 to 80. Besides providing basic assistance for slaves thrown out in the streets, women such as Nes'et Kadın also helped Black women through their illnesses and intervened between the slaves and their owners. They would purchase slaves from vicious owners through the funds that they were able to raise. They also operated a placement service for cooks and others seeking employment in the large city mansions.

Nes'et Kadın and others like her served a religious function as well. Even after their arrival in Istanbul and their conversion to Islam, many Africans still practised their own religious traditions, and the Kolbaşı provided the space and the leadership for the women-only ceremonies. Acting as a priestess or intermediary in what some have described as 'ecstatic rituals', the Kolbaşı provided a dramatic link between the African women and their culture. Called *Arap düğünü* (Arab or Black wedding) by outsiders, local people sometimes filed complaints against the observances.

Nes'et Kadın owned two houses and probably rented out one of them. In 1885, she sold a share in one of her houses to a manumitted female slave, who lived in another neighbourhood. Within a hundred metres of her house lived nine other Black women in three of the houses. Two other Black women lived in a house on the same street as Nes'et Kadın, while five houses in the neighbourhood belonged to Black women. One of those homeowners was a manumitted slave woman who sold her home in 1883.¹⁷⁸ It seems quite clear that following their manumission, Africans organized along economic and religious lines to care for themselves as much as they could.

On 4 August 1877, the British and Khedive (Viceroy) of Egypt signed the Anglo–Egyptian Convention for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1877. Of course, the agreement was an attempt by the British to restrict the Ottoman slave traffic. It forbade 'Negroes and Abyssinians' from leaving Egypt unless someone could prove that they were free or manumitted people. British cruisers were allowed to stop Egyptian ships in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, along the coast of Arabia, along the East African coast and, of course, in Egyptian waters. The Ottoman ambassador in London objected to the treaty. According to the Ottoman

Empire, the Khedive could not allow the searching of ships off the coast of Arabia, which were Ottoman waters.

The Khedive attempted to have the Ottoman government and the British government directly negotiate problematic aspects of the treaty, but Sultan Abdül Hamit II only promised to *consider* negotiations. Unlike the growing abolitionist movement in European countries, the Islamic world did not believe that slavery was appalling. Some rulers told the British that if they attempted to end slavery, it could end their regimes or even their lives. For that and other reasons, the 1877 convention had almost no effect on the Ottoman slave trade. There was one section of the treaty that directly referred to eunuchs. Pertaining to the issue of 'eunuch-making', the Khedive vowed 'to pursue as murderers all persons who may be found engaged in the mutilation of or traffic in children'. All domestic slave trading from one family to another was prohibited after seven years. This time both male and female White slaves were included.¹⁷⁹

The next attempt of the British to halt the slave trade was the Anglo-Ottoman Convention for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1880. With British pressure, as well as pressure from the Grand Vizier and the Council of Ministers, Sultan Abdül Hamit II agreed to consider a treaty. The sultan finally agreed to negotiate and the two governments signed the convention. There were some loopholes in the agreement. The traffic in slavery was reduced, though the centres of the slave trade moved. The wars in the Sudan and Ethiopia and the Mahdist-Ethiopian campaigns, plus the 1885 Italian occupation of Massawa, were events that brought the slave trade almost to a halt. The Ottomans opposed slavery in public, yet allowed it to continue clandestinely, urging provincial authorities to comply with the convention.

By the 1890s, there was a significant decrease in slaves going to the Ottoman Empire.¹⁸⁰ The Brussels Act of 1890 remained in force for 22 years, until the start of World War I. Although not as comprehensive as it should have been, it addressed both the exporting and the importing of slaves. The sultan decreed, 'The commerce, entry and passage of Black slaves in the Ottoman Empire and its dependencies is prohibited.' Yet, business went on as usual in many areas except for Egypt. Slaves still entered the Ottoman Empire, including eunuchs, though the numbers were diminishing somewhat.¹⁸¹ In the nineteenth century, the palace eunuchs did not have the power they held previously.

Most were African and their numbers were small, but they were still imported to the Ottoman Empire until late in that century.¹⁸² Overall, the total number of African slaves legally exported from Matamma, Massawa, Tajura, Berbera (Somalia) and Zeila may have been between 450,000 and 500,000 during the nineteenth century alone.¹⁸³

It appeared that slavery continued into the twentieth century, although the practice was illegal. Edmond Pears, a British representative, collected information and personally observed its continuation:

Slavery in Turkey has not ceased to exist. But it has become illegal though everybody who knows Turkey is aware that thousands of slaves are still found in the country, that every now and then Black slaves are landed from Africa, and that the sale of Circassian is by no means unknown. In a Turkish village where I lived for a year on my first arrival in the country, there was a house where an old Turkish woman always had from two to half a dozen little Circassian girls. The neighbours assured me, and I have no reason to doubt their statement, that her practice was to buy them young, to let them run wild on the beautiful hill-side for two or three years, and then to sell them into harems. They were not cruelly treated. Talking some three years ago with a medical man who has studied in England, France, and Germany, but who is a Turkish subject, he observed, 'You Europeans know nothing of what goes on in the harems. We hekims are privileged. You believe slavery is abolished – rubbish. I have myself examined five women for the purpose of sale within the last month.'¹⁸⁴

Former African slaves or their descendants plus free Africans lived in Istanbul in the early twentieth century. As disclosed in his autobiography, Irfan Orga, born in 1908, had a Black nursemaid, Inci (Pearl). Orga described her as 'coal black and only thirteen years old'. She was the daughter of the upstairs maid, Feride. Inci was born in Istanbul and her father was a servant in the sultan's palace. Orga recounted that after the death of her father, his grandmother took Inci and her mother into their house 'and after my birth Inci had been given to me'.¹⁸⁵

One should question the nature of the relationship in which someone could give a person to another. Even in the United States, to

make the claim that there were no slaves within a state's borders, the census included the category 'servants for life'. Perhaps this is a similar situation but perhaps it is not. However, that state of affairs was customary in servant/slave relationships then and even now in some regions, where an attendant becomes part of a household for life.

Professor Cem Behar, in his book on the 1885 Kasap Ilyas neighbourhood of Istanbul, reconstructed that era and provided an account of the Black people living there at that time. Kasap Ilyas (Butcher Ilyas) was a man who supplied meat for the Ottoman forces that conquered Istanbul. As a reward, the sultan gave him property. Behar noted that there were 38 Blacks, all manumitted slaves, living in the houses of the dozen or so streets. According to the census, six of those were men. The records refer to them as arap, zenci or zenciye who were born in Arabia, the Sudan or Ethiopia. Only a few of them listed any occupation.

Most of the Blacks lived in one of the 242 independent households located within the 149 houses. Some married and had children and four were cooks and servants living in various family units. For instance the muezzin or crier for the call to prayer Ahmed Efendi had such a domestic living in his household. In some cases the men were listed as slaves (kölesi) and, in one household, there was a female slave/concubine (cariyesi). The Kasap Ilyas neighbourhood did not appear to be an expensive place in which to live and one of the Black leaders resided there as well. The census of 1907 showed only 25 manumitted slaves living in scattered households and not just concentrated in a few houses.¹⁸⁶

Besides slaves and servants, there were also travellers from Africa to the Ottoman Empire. Felix V. Luschan, MD, stood on the 'New Bridge', the iron third Galata Bridge built in 1877 following the wooden bridge built in 1863. Also an anthropologist, Luschan heard voices from all over the world in 1910 or 1911. Armenians, Jews, Kurds, Persians, Circassians, Germans, East Indians, Chinese and Gypsies included the nationalities and ethnicities he observed. At one point he saw 'a Dinka [Southern Sudan] eunuch sitting on the motor-car of an Imperial princess and making his selâm to a group of equally dark and equally tall Bari [Nile Valley of Sudan] or Shilluk [Southern Sudan]'.¹⁸⁷

Bilin [language of Eritrea] and Nuer [language of Southern Sudan] also are very commonly spoken by Stamboul eunuchs, and I was once told by one of my coloured friends there that more than a thousand female servants are living in metropolitan palaces, all coming from Bornu and speaking Kanuri. Another day on the same bridge, I met some East Indians, speaking, as they told me, Hindi, Hindustani and Gujerati, and trying in vain to come to an understanding with a large troop of African Hajjis returning from Mecca, some of whom were Hausa, others from Zanzibar and the Swahili coast, others from Wadai and Baghirmi.¹⁸⁸

Dr Luschan had conducted fieldwork for about 30 years in Western Asia, or, Asia Minor and Syria. He wrote that Africans had been imported to that area 'from the earliest historical times down to our own days'. He also noted 'there are few houses of wealthy Mahometans without dark servants, male or female, and without half-caste children of the most various tints'. According to Luschan, the 'half-castes' regularly intermarry with their lighter counterparts without their offspring showing evidence of 'Negro' physical features. It would appear, then, that the descendents of African slaves and free people have been absorbed into the Asian Minor populace, including that of Turkey:

Nowhere, perhaps, with the exception only of Brazil, could miscegenation be better studied than in the large towns of the Levant. Domestic slavery is still flourishing there, and 'black ivory' generally comes, as in the old times, from the Upper Nile, but also from Bornu.¹⁸⁹

CHAPTER 5

BLACK EUNUCHS OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

In his 1718 book *Eunuchism Displayed*, Charles Ancillon commented on the eunuchs generally and of those in Turkey specifically. Generally, he remarked, ‘They have sometimes been raised to the highest Pinnacles of human Glory, and bask’d in the Sunshine of this World.’ However, people ‘look’d upon them as so many Erroneous Productions of the depraved and corrupted Minds of Princes’. He wrote that the Turkish eunuchs ‘are those who generally arrive to the highest Posts of Honour in the State, which, properly speaking, are possessed very rarely by any besides’.¹ Although Ancillon was against marriage between a woman and a eunuch, he did acknowledge that eunuchs could acquire power. He might have been surprised to learn that some eunuchs had successful marriages.

Ancillon observed part of an age-old dilemma connected to institutions of slavery. The slave, a stranger, must somehow become incorporated into a new society. At the same time, the society must view the slave as a resident stranger. Slavery, then, involves both ‘marginality and integration, contradictory principles’. The Ottoman power structure incorporated the Black eunuchs but Ottoman society, as a whole, did not integrate them. Although a few could amass amazing power, they were still African slaves – outsiders and strangers.²

Manufacturing eunuchs was an old practice for eliminating reprisals following military victories, to ensure certain family lines could never succeed to power, for crimes, to produce castrati singers and for medical

purposes. Under the Ottomans, eunuchs were servants and protectors of the sultan and his palace. Therefore, when the Ottomans took over Byzantium and its organisations in 1453, 'they took over the palace eunuchs and maintained them in office to the present century, developing a system from which it is possible to see in detail the mechanics of an authoritarian state in which sexual repression [...] helped one man maintain a dictatorship through the control of a hierarchy of caponized and sadistic males'.³

Before the Ottomans conquered the Byzantines, it appears that they neither used eunuchs nor kept harems. Caliph Muawiyah, founder of the Ommiad dynasty, received credit for beginning the practice. The Ottoman victories in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa created a glut of slaves, including eunuchs, for the sultan and his important administrators. Islamic polygamy 'combined neatly' with the Byzantine customs of 'sequestering royalty, establishing a palace school, and the keeping of household slaves'. Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror also copied the Byzantine gynaeceia (separate women's apartments), resulting in the harem.⁴

As time went on the Byzantine custom of the seclusion of royalty began to impress itself on the Ottomans. The methods previously used to protect the Byzantine rulers were also adopted, and gradually the harem and the employment of eunuchs came about. The two factors went together as they had previously, and 'despotism and polygamy had created the necessity for eunuchs'.⁵

Mehmed the Conqueror captured the city of Novo Brdo in 1455 and, after the surrender of the city, grouped the men, women, boy and girl inhabitants. He gave the girls away and took the 320 boys to become members of his personal army, the Janissaries. He took eight of that group to be his chamberlains and they plotted to assassinate him. One of them informed him of the plot and, after that, did not want any of their number to be his chamberlains. He did take six other boys, had them castrated, and made them made guards of his wives.⁶

The Ottomans began to employ the seraglio system to supervise both the slaves and eunuchs guarding them. They built seraglios in several cities, but the one Süleyman the Magnificent built came to be known as

the Sublime Port or the Grand Seraglio since it was the office of the Grand Vizier and the centre of the Ottoman government. Because of their seclusion, the Seraglio residents developed their own manners, traditions, customs and even their own dialect.⁷

The word 'seraglio', is a Westernisation of the Persian word 'serai' (which at first meant simply palace or building – as in caravanserai: a hostel for caravans) but came to mean the whole of the palace of the sultan, not only the women's quarters but also the central apparatus of government included within its walls. It consisted of a cabinet of ministers, a supreme court of justice, an extraordinary military and civil academy and all the personnel required to service it.⁸

The slaves for Mediterranean Islam were usually 'foreigners' and not from Muslim areas. Eunuchs and other slaves originated from three major areas. The first source was the 'forested parts of central and Eastern Europe called by Muslims the "Bilad as-Saqaliba" (slave country)'. The second was 'the steppes of central Asia called the "Bilad al-Atrak"', the Turks country or, Turkistan. The third source was 'the savanna and the fringes of the wooded territory south of the Sahara called the country of the blacks or "Bilad as-Sudan"'. The supply of slaves dried up beginning in the eleventh century as Slavic peoples converted to Christianity and the Turkish people converted to Islam. That would leave sub-Saharan Africa as the primary source of eunuchs. The first appearance of African eunuchs in the seraglio was noted in the latter fifteenth century and by the seventeenth century they comprised the entire staff of the sultan's harem,⁹

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the first eunuchs were all White. They were Circassians and Balkans, men from the northwestern Caucasus and the Balkan Peninsula. The Ottomans used Africans to guard the women of the harem – or *haremlık* – while they used White eunuchs as chamberlains in other areas of the palace. The African eunuchs gradually took over all of the duties of the White eunuchs, including the seraglio. The White eunuchs were *spadones*, mostly men with only their testicles removed, while the African eunuchs were 'shaved':

The eunuchs were not only the guardians of the harem, themselves physical symbols, like the veil (*hijab*), and curtain (*sitara*), of the seclusion and separation of women; but they were also neutral emissaries in a moral universe which was highly charged with

sexual tension, a universe in which the concept of *fitna*, a word which means both sexual temptation and 'discord' or 'strife,' was held up as a constant threat to the social order.¹⁰

While some saw eunuchs as necessary to their system, others decried their use as being detrimental to it. To the latter, eunuchs were among the most despicable of the palace professionals. They were not only corrupting the system of government, but they were also a perversion. Stacton wrote, "They lived by extortionate bribery and their intrigues sometimes proved dangerous. They clogged the machinery of government, they were a pain in the neck and an affliction to the ears; to the eyes, they were an eyesore, and there is not much good to be said of them."¹¹ Although some did not like eunuchs for whatever reason, the evidence seems to indicate that his opinion was extreme.

The Rise of the Black Eunuchs

The Chief White Eunuch (Kapı Ağası) had been the highest of the four head eunuchs. He was the head of the Outer Service (Bırın), meaning that he was the sultan's personal confidante and head of the palace school. The Kapı Ağası was also 'Gatekeeper-in-Chief, head of the infirmary, and general master of ceremonies of the Seraglio.' Before the rise of the Chief Black Eunuch, he also controlled all communication for the sultan and was the only one that the sultan allowed to speak to him in person.¹²

According to Carter Findley, the Outer Service was 'the real centre of government and was responsible for all functions having to do with the sultan's relations with the outside world'. Members of the Outside Service included military administrators who shaped the position of Grand Vizier. However, some functions moved to other power centres, including the grand vizierate. With the rise of the power of the Kızlar Ağası, important palace services became the domain of those who controlled the Inside Service (Enderun), the private residence of the sultan. That seat of power shifted to the sultan's private quarters and fell under the control of the Black eunuchs and even some of powerful women of the harem system. The Kızlar Ağası could then exclusively transmit communications between the sultan and other officials and control the palace school.¹³ There were six major divisions of the Inside Service, known as chambers, with inside boys at the bottom. As the

young men rose in rank and became full members of the household, they became ağalar of the inside.

- (1) Greater and Lesser Chambers – where cadets received instruction.
- (2) Falconer's Chamber
- (3) Campaign Chamber (established in the seventeenth century)
- (4) Pantry Chamber
- (5) Treasury Chamber (private, not public treasury)
- (6) Privy Chamber¹⁴

There seems to be some confusion in terms that needs some explanation. The title for the position of Chief Black Eunuch is Kızlar Ağası, the Chief Black Eunuch of the sultan's palace. The person holding that rank is called an ağa, such as Abbas Ağa. He held the rank of Paşa and along with a vizier, could display a standard with three horsetails (the Grand Vizier could warrant five while the sultan, nine). The prestige of the Chief Black Eunuch is also reflected in his title, according to Egyptian writer Ibrahim al-Muwaylihi:

His honourific title has the same arrangement as that of the Grand Vizier and the Shaykh al-Islam. That of the Grand Vizier is written: Fakhamatlu Dawlatlu Efendim Hadratlu; that of the Shaykh al-Islam as Dawlatlu Samahatlu Efendim Hadratlu; and that of the Chief Eunuch as Dawlatlu Inayatlu Efendim Hadratlu.¹⁵

There was also the position of Chief Black Eunuch of the sultan's harem (seraglio), which is a different position and was under the supervision of the Kızlar Ağası. He might have the rank of ağa as well. In some accounts, it is not clear which of the two men is being described, perhaps because the writer was unaware which Chief Black Eunuch she or he was depicting. Without the author providing a name or other relevant information, it can be quite difficult to tease out which Chief Black Eunuch position the person is profiling.

The unique palace school was probably responsible for the Ottoman Empire maintaining power for as long as it did, because it trained the leadership. It educated the young men in the Qur'an and the principles of Islamic theology and law, as well as government and military science.

Students studied a liberal arts curriculum and engaged in physical exercises. Specifically the school taught Persian literature and poetry, Turkish history, mathematics, Turkish, Arabic and Persian languages, vocal and martial music and Turkish music. Instruction in physical training covered boxing, archery, wrestling, javelin throwing and sword fighting. Further, the students had to learn a trade or a craft that might include gardening, cabinet making, embroidery, bow making or some other skill.¹⁶ The trained administrators could conduct the affairs of state in spite of the lack of (or even interference from) leadership from the sultans. Slaves who had limited abilities received menial assignments instead of education.

African eunuchs, according to many historians, were not introduced to the Grand Seraglio until 1582. However, Gio Maria Angiolello, an Italian captured as a youth to serve in the Grand Seraglio, wrote about one who served from 1473 until 1481.¹⁷ Therefore, it took 100 years and the reign of Murad III before African eunuchs became customary. Angiolello wrote a book about his observations titled *Historia turchesca di Gio Angiolello schiavo et altri schiavi dall'anno 1429 sui 1513* and, though there is a difference of numbers of principal White eunuchs, his detailed observations are important. Historian Barnette Miller cited him.

According to Angiolello, the principal White eunuch was the chief eunuch, followed in authority by the Head of the White Eunuchs of the Imperial Harem Treasury (Hazineदार Usta) and the Head Housekeeper, sometimes called the Lady Stewardess (Kethüda or Kahya). Each of them had 100 pages, slaves from Christian parents or communities. An additional 20 eunuchs served as messengers between the three principal eunuchs and the gate guards, because the sultan did not want anyone in the palace to have direct contact with gate guards or anyone else outside the palace. If anyone inside the palace wanted to buy anything from the outside or needed something accomplished, one of the 20 eunuchs took the money for the request to the guards and ordered them to either purchase the item or perform the necessary task. When one of the principal eunuch posts became vacant, the sultan promoted one of the 20 to fill that opening.¹⁸

According to K. Erhan Bozkurt, the following servants did general household duties in the harem:

- (1) Acemiler – novices in training and without any responsibilities
- (2) Cariyeler – slave maids who did household work under the supervision of a master or mistress
- (3) Kalfalar – experienced stewardess who worked alone or assisted by Cariyes
- (4) Ustalar – experienced slave master, heads of teams who organized the work and whose direct supervisor was the Kızlar Ağası

The masters (Ustalar) were those who had served the longest in the harem and who led teams of servants who performed specific duties. The masters and their duties are as follows:

- (1) Çaşnigir Usta – Master of Gastronomy, whose team of stewardess and Cariyes set the table and who would taste the food
- (2) Kahveci Usta – Master of Coffee, whose team brewed the drink not only for the sultan but also for his mother and their guests. His team would also serve the coffee.
- (3) Ibriktar Usta – Master of the Pitcher, whose team brought water in a small pitcher used for washing the hands and feet. It was especially used for washing before praying.
- (4) Kilerci Usta – Master of the Pantry, whose team was responsible for fruit, drinks and wheat in the stores. This group assisted the gastronomy team when the latter served food.
- (5) Kutucu Usta – Master of Caretaking, whose team prepared the utensils for the baths and assisted in the bathing of the sultan, high-ranking members of his family and court favourites.
- (6) Külhancı Usta – Stoker Master, whose team heated and cleaned the Turkish baths. They also assisted in the bathing of the sultan's women with whom he chose to spend the night.
- (7) Hastalar Ustası – Master of the Sick, whose team was responsible for the health of all of those in the harem. They cared for the sick, performed midwife duties and helped with abortions. Because princes were not allowed to have children before becoming sultan, it was deemed necessary to end pregnancies. Wet nurses and babysitters also worked with this team.
- (8) Hazine Darı Ağası – Treasurer Master, who led a private team of 15 to 20 stewardess and maids (hazinedar) who performed private services

for the sultan, including the expense accounts for the harem. A group of five, including the Treasurer Master, was responsible for the palace treasures. The Master was the only person who had all the keys. The sultan personally chose the maids. The new sultans would dismiss this team and appoint new ones.

- (9) Kethüda Kadın – Chief Housekeeper/Steward, whose team arranged celebrations and activities. Nightly, 15 to 20 of the team of maids patrolled the harem in pairs or in threes. The Chief Housekeeper was the most experienced and cultured servant who had to commit to her duty for nine years.

The Chief White Eunuchs, like the Chief Black Eunuchs who replaced them, involved themselves with the erection and restoration of mosques in Istanbul. Many of those mosques were formerly Christian churches. The emperor Justinian and the empress Theodora commissioned the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in AD 527, completing it 536. Actually a working model for the future Haghia Sophia, it served as a church for almost a thousand years. In 1503, Hüseyin Ağa, Chief Black Eunuch of Sultan Beyazıt II (1481–1512) whose tomb is in the garden to the north of the church, converted the beautiful Byzantine basilica to a mosque by adding a minaret. Unfortunately, the current plaque at the main entrance to the area identifies Hüseyin Ağa as a White eunuch (Bâbüssâde Ağa), not a Black eunuch.

It was Hüseyin Ağa who also added the six-bayed portico at the entrance to the building, plus the medrese (Islamic higher educational school) that forms the other three sides of the courtyard. Saints Sergius and Bacchus is known in Turkish as Küçük Aya Sofya Camii, the Little Mosque of Haghia Sophia, because of its supposed resemblance to the larger and more famous structure.¹⁹ Today the U-shaped medrese surrounds a tea garden and in 1996, renovations began at the site. Inside are art classrooms, bookstores, art galleries and cafes.

Mehmed Ağa, a Chief Black Eunuch under the reign of Murad III, was responsible for the rise in power of the African eunuchs. A politically astute person while Master of the Gate, he also managed to wrest the administration of the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina before the 1603 death of the Chief White Eunuch, Gazanfer Ağa.²⁰ Mehmed Ağa probably would have failed in any attempt to abruptly usurp the total

power of Gazanfer Ağa while the latter was alive. Through 30 years of office the Chief White Eunuch had influenced Sultan Selim II, his son Sultan Murad III and, to some extent, even Sultan Mehmed III.

The importance of properly administering the religious trusts of Mecca and Medina was crucial in keeping the Ottoman Empire together. They were the sultans' symbolic representations and their spiritual presence to Muslims and Arabs in the far reaches of the empire. Annual caravans traveled from Istanbul to the Holy Cities, demonstrating consistency of authority. Additionally, the sultans could uphold their claims to be the protectors and guardians of those sites as caliph. To seize the opportunity to administer those trusts was a major responsibility.²¹

Gazanfer Ağa, a Hungarian, wanted to be as close to his patron, Prince Selim, as possible. When the prince became sultan in 1566, he invited Gazanfer and his brother Cafer to become members of his inner household. A person's status depended on the extent that one could penetrate another man's household. The complication was that only a eunuch could accept such a position. Both Gazanfer and his brother decided that they would accept the position and have themselves castrated, but Cafer did not survive the operation. Because of his faithfulness and his courage, Gazanfer obtained two of the highest positions of the inner service, that of Chief White Eunuch and the head of the privy chamber. The African eunuchs had to bide their time because they knew that not only would Gazanfer Ağa make a formidable enemy, but also that the sultan would protect his devoted servant fiercely.²² Although Gazanfer Ağa died after Chief Black Eunuch Mehmed Ağa, the office of the latter had eclipsed that of his rival.

During the reign of Mehmed II there were 23 White eunuchs in the Grand Seraglio of the 40 total employed by the sultan. After the introduction of African eunuchs as guards for the royal harem, their numbers increased. By the sixteenth century, there were 40 African eunuchs to guard approximately 300 women. Under Murad III with his 1,200 women, the number of African eunuchs increased accordingly. At times there may have been as many as 900 of them, though many historians believe this number to be an overestimate.²³

When the Turks began to seclude the women, they found a readily available supply of boys for eunuchs from captured areas. The White eunuchs appeared to be more delicate with a high mortality rate in their production, while African eunuchs seemed hardier and, at the same time,

cheaper. That created a demand and soon African leaders involved in the slave trade learned that it was better to keep captured boys than to have them killed. Those who made eunuchs began to transport them to Muslim countries. In all probability, only geographical factors prevented slavers from shipping them to China, where there were huge numbers of eunuchs. In addition, those eunuchs in China were all Chinese but those in Turkey were those other than Turks. As the proportion of White eunuchs decreased, so did their power.²⁴

In the Ottoman Empire, the Kızlar Ağası (a.k.a. Ağa of the Gate of Felicity, Chief Black Eunuch or Ağa of the female slaves) enjoyed the title of paşa or, general. For Ottoman Africans, the eunuch establishment offered them one of the few opportunities to rise to high office. The sultan bestowed the title of paşa on a senior civil servant or on a high-ranking army officer, authorizing him to display one, two or three horsetails on his standard. They carried the standards in various processions or if in the field, exhibited them outside the tent.²⁵ The sultans permitted the Kızlar Ağası to display three horsetails while only the sultan displayed four.

Johann Wild, a German soldier captured by the Ottomans and who later converted to Islam, personally observed eunuchs during his ritual trip to the Prophet's tomb in 1607. He also observed eunuchs of Istanbul when he visited there. Upon returning to Germany and reconvertng to Christianity, he wrote of his experiences.

These people are called 'Hadım,' and wealthy, noble lords render them honour. Also, these castrated Hadım look after the women's quarters of the Turks, for no other male person may enter them except these castrated chamberlains. The emperor has over one hundred of them in Constantinople who are responsible for the women's quarters. They are made into great lords. The current emperor, Sultan Ahmed, has made such a chamberlain a paşa. His is now the high paşa of Constantinople and is known as Hadım Mehmed Paşa. I myself in my own time, when I came by sea from Alexandria, in the year 1610 in the month of December, have seen him.²⁶

They were administrators 'of many religious endowments for the benefit of various mosques, and particularly of the *vakfs* (deeds of trust)

of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina'. The Chief Black Eunuch, besides his private dwellings, had eunuchs and concubines of his own, as well as a stable of over 300 horses. According to one source, his power was immense, particularly since he was the only officer permitted at all times to ask for an audience with the sultan. He helped with state appointments, adding to his riches by placing a fee on the many favours he was in a position to confer. However, the sultans tolerated the 'bribery' because the Kızlar Ağası, having no children and, therefore, no heirs, amassed fortunes that reverted to the ruler.²⁷

Under the Ottoman Empire, all slaves were subject to the rules of the slavery institution. That included müsadere, or the sultan's confiscation of property upon the slave's death. Religious law allowed masters to be heirs not only to their slaves, but also to the slaves they freed.²⁸

Following the Chief Black Eunuch in rank was the Grand Treasurer (Hazinebaşısı, or Head of the Outer Treasury, the White or Black eunuch who was second assistant to the Chief Black Eunuch), who handed the harem's finances, the Musahib (chief liaison officer, gentleman-in-waiting, aide-de-camp), 'then the master of the chamber, chief gatekeeper of the apartments, and all the various levels of the female hierarchy of the harem'.²⁹ The Musahib was a personal advisor and not an official one. He was the liaison between the sultan and the sultana's staff. Even as early as the fifteenth century the power of the Chief Black Eunuch was considerable, and, as Angiolello, a Venetian who was in service in the Grand Seraglio, presumably as a page, from about 1453 to 1481, wrote in his memoirs, the women of the palace were guarded by the following:

[A] Saracen eunuch who has the right to correct and chastise all persons in the palace and who receives a salary of one hundred aspres a day, besides living expenses and a retinue of slaves – to say nothing of the many gifts from the Great Turk, a house outside the palace, and a large villa about six miles distant from Constantinople which has been presented to him. He is free to do as he likes three or four hours during the day, but at night he must always remain in the palace.³⁰

From Capture to Administration

One fifteenth-century Chief Black Eunuch had a protégé who lived in Istanbul, studied there 'and rose to high rank as a judge in the Ottoman

service'. The protégé wrote a book in Turkish, still not published, which assailed prejudice against Africans, one of several on that subject.³¹

Obtaining eunuchs for the Ottoman Empire was a long and risky process. Poor African parents would supposedly sell children to Arab dealers, hoping their offspring would receive wealth and power if they became eunuchs. Arab slave hunters captured the majority of the Africans. The horsemen would gallop into a village and take boys between the ages of seven and ten. Sometimes there would be battles between the Arabs and the villagers, but the well-armed Arabs usually won those combats. The boys, and any other Africans captured, were tied together and marched across the desert. A significant number of the boys died but profits from the sale of eunuchs were so high that it was worth the effort, even if only one out of ten survived:

Most of the young boys were dragged to the convents of Christian Coptic monks such as the ones at Giza, Asyût and especially the monastery of Dar-El-Abiad near Sohag in Upper Egypt, and there castrated.

For those who survived the ordeal, the monks received in return not only an excellent price but the essential protection of the Lords of Islam for this valuable function which the Mohammedans were themselves not allowed to perform.³²

Khalil Agha, Chief Eunuch of Khedive İsmail Paşa's mother, established a eunuch factory at Massawa, an Ethiopian port on the Red Sea, in 1868. He hired an Italian doctor to perform the operations and for 20 years sold castrated boys in Egypt and Constantinople. Both the eunuch and the doctor became rich because their business undercut the profits of the monks. The doctor rationalized his work by claiming he was much more humane because of his techniques. He asserted that he only lost one in ten patients while the monks lost eight or nine out of ten.³³ Following is a description of the usual procedure that the boys underwent:

The child was restrained on a chair; the phallus and scrotum were tied with a cord which was pulled taught, and the phallus, scrotum, and testes were removed as close as possible with a single stroke of a razor. Bleeding was stopped with boiling oil, and the

wound was dressed with an extract of wax and tallow. In some instances hemostasis was achieved with hot sand, and the wound was dressed with an extract of acacia bark. The mortality was said to be high, only about one in three surviving [...]. Owing to the high death rate, the survivors were sold at high prices either to Turkey or to Persia.³⁴

Historian Jan S. Hogendorn hypothesized an economic theory pertaining to the price of eunuchs based upon their death rate. If a slave boy sold for \$10 and the death rate of a eunuch was 90 per cent, then a eunuch would have to sell for at least ten times (10x) the price of an ordinary slave to be competitive. If the price of eunuchs fell significantly, then the makers of eunuchs would probably consider selling unemasculated boys. The author assumed that the market for slaves and eunuchs was 'reasonably competitive', the cost of the operation was relatively low and that the handling and transport costs of eunuchs and unemasculated slaves were similar. By using that formula and historical accounts, Hogendorn was able to conclude that reports of high death rates were probably true.³⁵ Like the eunuchs of China and the Skoptzy, these future Ottoman eunuchs would have problems urinating.

As reported by others, 'a nail was introduced into the urethra to prevent stricture formation. The eunuchs squatted to urinate, and both urethral strictures and incontinence must have been common, because some eunuchs carried silver quills for self-catheterisation, presumably because of the strictures, and others used a removable plug to prevent incontinence.'³⁶ That did not seem to prevent incontinence because many people who could be near one of the eunuchs noted the odour attached to that condition.

Most historians believe that Africans became eunuchs in their lands of origin and not in Ottoman Empire or the Mamluk sultanate. The latter was a state that controlled the southern part of Anatolia, Egypt, Syria and the Hejaz. One location for castration was supposedly the Abyssinian principality of Hadya (Hadeya), south of Wafat, where captors took the prospective eunuchs and emasculated in a nearby village. One traveller reported that the ruler of Hadya 'was the strongest of all the seven Muslim rulers of Abyssinia', and that the Africans were transported from 'the land of the infidels'. Since the Christian ruler forbade the castration of Black slaves within his realm, the slave catchers

took them to the town of Washalaw (Washlu) 'where the people were savages, having no religion'. Those 'savages', according to the informant, were the only people in the country who castrated, having been engaged in that practice since the fourteenth century.

Both the slave catchers and the slave merchants met in Washalaw and, after castrating their captives, took them to the Muslim region of Hadya for care and for a second operation to open the urethra and remove the pus clogs. The residents of Hadya had no medical experience, but they could at least perform the relatively minor procedure. Still, most of the newly neutered slaves died because they did not receive any medical attention until they arrived at Hadya. Ironically, if they remained at Washalaw, more would probably have died because none would have received any medical attention there. If this account were accurate, it would mean that neither Muslims nor Christians practised castration in Abyssinia.³⁷

To ship the African eunuchs to the Ottoman Empire, traders routed them directly from the Red Sea, from Jeddah, or from Tripoli and sold them with other slaves. This business continued until the fall of the Ottoman Empire, even though the slave market tapered off because of French and British pressure:

The Anglo-Turkish convention of 1868 forbade the sale of black slaves (though it left it open for white Circassian women to populate the Ottoman harems), and British consulates kept what was known as a sharp eye on the landing of black slaves in Constantinople, taking those they discovered to special establishments (operated at the expense of the Ottoman Empire) where they were housed until such time as they could be placed as free servants in the houses of the richest.³⁸

From the beginning of Ottoman rule in Egypt, the Porte required the paşa to send 'black, nice-looking foreign (acemi) ağalar who do not understand Turkish'. At the same time during the eighteenth century, the sultans twice sent emphatically worded circulars to Egypt that forbade the mutilation of young boys:

In 1127/1715 an imperial edict was sent to the *vali* and the *qadi* of Egypt declaring that castrating young boys to turn them into

eunuchs was inhuman and violated the *Shari'a* law and the sultan's orders. The decree stated that the boys were castrated in 'terrible places, resembling slaughterhouses, in Jirja, Fayyum, and Cairo itself.' The edict cited the *fatwa* issued by Sheyüi-Islam 'Abdürrahim, the Grand Mufti of Istanbul, who declared this kind of mutilation a forbidden innovation. He said that many of the unfortunate boys died after castration; the survivors were doomed to be deprived of progeny and had to spend their lives in the company of women.³⁹

The edict was obviously not to be taken seriously because, before their issue, there were three others (1124/1712, 1133/1722 and 1150/1737) requesting ağalar for the sultans' harems. The Porte ordered the paşas of Egypt to send '30 or 40 young and comely eunuchs, ten from his own harem and the rest from households of other rich people'. The third edict did stipulate that the eunuchs should be from the households of deceased emirs, but those numbers would probably not meet the demand. The sultans (Ahmed III and Mahmud I) could officially 'wash their hands' of ordering castrations, yet still receive the benefits of having eunuchs.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Ahmed III's Grand Vizier Damad Silahdar Ali Paşa (Apr. 27, 1713–Aug. 5, 1716) ordered the governor of Egypt to castrate all Abyssinians living in his country, but the governor was able to disregard that order because of the Grand Vizier's death.⁴¹ During the period Damad Silahdar Ali Paşa served, the Chief Black Eunuch was Anber Mehmed Ağâ.

It was not only the rich or the sultan's palace that sought African eunuchs, but also those in business and manufacturing. Bursa is a region of Turkey known for commerce and industry and was the Ottoman Empire's first capital. Some of the legal records from the sixteenth century began recording the presence of African eunuchs. Eunuch Hacı Cevher settled in Bursa after his emancipation and freed 12-year-old Bülbül, the daughter of his Ethiopian slave woman. Another merchant freed both his Ethiopian and his Indian slaves and he left them an inheritance.⁴² Many older people who lived in the empire remembered their lala, who was the eunuch manservant in charge of a child in a household.

Eunuchs for the sarayı received their education through a kalfan, or governess, plus a Lala Paşa, or tutor. The imam (leader of prayer) of the

ağalar taught the youth prayers, reading, writing and some math. This fact appears to dispute the claims of some who said that the eunuchs were uneducated and ignorant, according to composer Leyla (Saz) Hanımefendi, who lived in the Çırağan Palace with her physician father:

The novices were taught, at the same time, basic hygiene and were initiated into all details of household service. Those who were gifted and worked hard, who learned quickly and better than the others were naturally very much appreciated by their mistresses who then took them into their particular service and had them accompany them on their excursions. Of course these favoured eunuchs were better dressed and often received presents and tips; but in spite of all the favours which their mistresses lavished upon them, it was impossible to advance beyond the rank which was assigned to them by seniority – seniority was the basis for all promotion.⁴³

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of Edward Wortley Montagu, ambassador of the Court of Saint James, briefly mentioned the eunuchs that she saw in 1717. Although her contributions relating to the dress of the court women and descriptions of the women's baths are far more important and detailed, still she does not write anything negative about the eunuchs or their behaviour. She seemed to take a bit more notice of the clothes of the Kızlar Ağası than she does with others in the following event. She went to watch the sultan and his procession on their way to the mosque and noted all of the court dignitaries that paraded by the crowd. In front of the sultan was the Kızlar Ağası 'in a deep yellow cloth (which suited very well to his black face) lined with sables'.⁴⁴ The widow of Sultan Mustafa II invited Lady Montagu to dinner at which an African eunuch met her and her Greek interpreter at the door and helped her out of the carriage. After dinner, two African eunuchs escorted her to the rooms of Fatima, the grand lady of the deputy Grand Vizier. She described her experience as being in 'Mahomet's Paradise'.⁴⁵

Leyla Hanım was admitted to the Imperial Palace about 1854, from the reign of Abdülmecid I (1839–1861) to that of the last Ottoman sultan, Mehmed VI Vahideddin (1918–1922). Her father, Hekim İsmail Paşa, held a privileged position, serving as Surgeon-in-Chief to the Palace and private physician to the Imperial Family. He also served as

diplomat. Leyla, through her memoirs, provides us a unique and personal view of the mid-nineteenth century through early twentieth-century harem. Her account also included the roles of the eunuchs in preceding and following paragraphs.⁴⁶

The valide sultan (dowager sultana) or the Lady Stewardess/Lady Controller (Kethüda), if there was no valide sultan, all had first and second eunuchs. So did the sultan's consorts and the great princesses. When the sultanes (princesses) married, their ağalar and kalfas (senior female slaves) were appointed.⁴⁷ All of the ağalar drew a salary appropriate to their rank and their functions from the private treasury of the sultan. They also received two suits every year plus a greatcoat. The masters and mistresses to whom they were directly attached often gave them a supplementary salary as well. Generally speaking, the palace eunuchs were very well cared for.⁴⁸

The valide sultan ruled the harem, but the Chief Black Eunuch acted as her prime minister. He was directly in charge of the harem women and was responsible for the sultan noticing one of them. He had other eunuchs to assist in his duties, and was the liaison between the valide sultan and the harem women, plus the liaison between the sultan and the outside world:

He was, in fact, one of the highest 'men' in the kingdom, and his interests and influence extended far beyond the walls of the Seraglio. With the general running of the harem he was not directly concerned. That was relegated to the female Cabinet, or Privy Council, as it might be called.⁴⁹

After arriving at their stations, doctors examined the eunuchs and subsequently, they received their assignments:

The physicians to the harem inspected the eunuchs on arrival to be certain that both penis and testes had been removed and reexamined them every few years to be certain that nothing was amiss. The eunuchs entered the court service at the lowest rank and passed successively through the grades of novice, middle grade, and highest rank. Strict rules of behaviour were enforced for the eunuchs' guild. Some took to learning and literature and served as tutors to the royal children; others rose to high

administrative ranks. Some 200 eunuchs were said to have lived in the palace of Topkapı in Istanbul after the royal family had moved to other palaces, and after the Turkish revolution the eunuchs continued to be devoted servants until the royal family was sent into exile in March of 1924.⁵⁰

The Topkapı Sarayı (Topkapı Palace) was the Great Palace of the Osmanlı Sultans. Mehmed the Conqueror began its construction in 1459 on Istanbul's Golden Horn and it was the home of the sultans from the 1470s until they abandoned it as their residence in the 1850s. The area designated as the harem 'is a veritable labyrinth of passages, courtyards, gardens, staircases, and rooms – some 300 of them [...]'. It included the quarters of the Black eunuchs (Kara Ağalar Koğuşu) who protected the harem, plus the rooms and schoolrooms of the princes. The sultan's private apartments were there, plus the apartments of the sultan's brothers who lived in confinement. Mehmed did not include the harem in the original construction of the palace, but Murad III (1574–1595) seems to have constructed the earliest harem buildings.

There is a chapel (mescit) of the Black eunuchs in the harem area of the palace, probably restored after the July 1665 fire. The walls are covered with seventeenth century tiles and the ceiling with calligraphic art, while the niche contains an image of the Kaaba.⁵¹ A door opens into the Courtyard of the Black Eunuchs (Kara Ağalar Taşlığı), decorated with tiles, while another entrance leads to their rooms. One can still tour limited areas of the palace or trace the route on a palace map:

The living quarters of the Black Eunuchs are arranged around an inner covered courtyard in three stories with a tall fireplace at one end. There are ten or twelve little rooms on each floor, but even so they must have been very crowded since there were several hundred of them; doubtless they served in watches and slept in relays. Returning to the open courtyard, we pass on the left a staircase that leads up to the Princes' Schoolrooms where the young sons of the sultan received their instruction; these are pretty rooms with good tiles, but they are not now open to the public. Just beyond, a door leads to the apartments of the Chief Black Eunuch or Kızlar Ağası (literally Lord of the Girls); he was a most

important and powerful official in the Harem, but his apartments (also closed) are small and gloomy.⁵²

All of the eunuchs of the hierarchy (those not appointed to high positions) lived in the three-storey building, located between the harem and a semi-public courtyard. Because the upper floors extended beyond the porch, those rooms were wider than those on the lower floor. There were two rows of rooms, one row on each side of a vaulted corridor that reached the height of the building. That allowed the eunuchs on all three floors to look down on an inner court that had a hooded fireplace at one end. The position of the rooms also allowed the eunuchs to witness the punishments carried out in the inner court. The Chief Black Eunuch also had his own kitchen within the imperial kitchen, another indication of his importance. Following the fire of 1574, the restored Topkapı Palace was rebuilt with ten kitchens, reduced to seven by the end of the seventeenth century, but the Chief Black Eunuch still had his own. When a novice needed punishment, the chief of the guard sat in this corridor. The wrongdoer was 'made to lie down on the matting covering the floor and received the *falaka* [striking the soles of the feet] or the *tabanca* [slapping the face] punishment, according to the degree of his guilt'.⁵³

The Chief of the Guard (Baş Kapı Gılamı) had a suite off a corridor that held his dining room, plus a room containing a significant fountain with an inscription. Besides having a verse from the Qur'an, there was a message that reflected the cohesiveness of the African eunuchs. Though somewhat lengthy, it clearly demonstrates that they showed concern over each other's welfare:

This is the subject of this notice: to our brethren who have been honoured in our time with the service of the Sultan in this Imperial Hall, and to those who will come after us, let it be known that the *ağas* our brethren who were here in the year 1015 (1606/7) decided altogether, seniors and newcomers, old and young, that they all found it advisable that when one of us is freed we should each, to please God, give him our quarterly allowance. But that notice was burned. So in the time of His Excellency the Ağa of the House of Felicity Abas Ağ, the *lâla* Hızır Ağ, the Ağ of the Old Palace Mahmud Ağ, and the chief of the guard the *ağa* Su'eyy Ağ, it was written down again in its original form. Let our

brethren who come after us make no objection, and let them not refrain from acting accordingly.⁵⁴

The African eunuchs held a variety of posts under the sultans. Although many believe that the eunuchs only worked in the harem protecting the women, they held other important and high positions. For instance, they not only guarded the women to prevent them from having sexual relations with none other but the sultans, but also ensured that young men under their care did not have sexual relations with each other:

Other posts for the Black Eunuchs included that of Guardian of the Virgins, and Eunuch to the Queen-mother (Valide Ağa), the Shahzadeler Ağa, in charge of the Royal Progeny, the Fazna Ağa of the Monastery of the Decayed Wives (concubines of former Grand Signiors or Rulers), and the Kızlar Ağa, the controller of Sherbets, Confectionery and Drugs, and the Keeper of Gifts (Peshkeshji-bashi), who took care of the many presents given to the sultan by his own people and visiting dignitaries. One of the most important positions, however, was the training of the officer corps, both military and civil, and this was done in the seraglio area (the harem of women being only one part of this), great care being taken to ensure that the young men did not wander from their quarters.⁵⁵

There were a few changes over the years when compared to the Black eunuch posts of the seventeenth century. Then there were ten important positions, the first five that are in the above list. They are the Kızlar Ağası, the Valide Ağa, the Shahzadeler Ağa, the Fazna Ağa and the Peshkeshji-bashi. The Büyük Oda Ağa (chief of the large dormitory for novice pages) commanded the greater chamber while the Küçük Oda Ağa (chief of the small dormitory for novice pages) commanded the lesser chamber. The Baş Kapa Oğlani was the chief porter of the women's apartments and two Mesgidgi Barchi, imams, belonged to the valide sultan and were ordained for the women's prayers.⁵⁶

Further, there seemed to be little change in the nine rules for the African eunuch guards of the harem. Even after the Topkapı Palace ceased to be the quarters of the sultans, it became the home for elderly

and retired women who still received protection. The first rule dictated proper harem conduct and conduct outside the harem. Rules 2 through 4 stipulated the harem women's proper dress and hairstyle, plus their face covering. When they did leave the harem, 'they had to be attended by a harem ağa and have the permission of the Ağa of the House of Felicity'. It was the duty of the eunuchs to ensure that the women followed the rules.

Rule 5 stipulated that the eunuchs could not be in the harem later than a half-hour after sunset. Rules 6 through 8 specified how they were to lock the harem doors at night 'with strong iron locks'. It also specified that someone was to call the Ağa of the House of Felicity if a woman took ill during the night and forbade 'Christian women such as peddlers, embroiderers and dressmakers from entering the imperial harem'. Rule 9 specified, 'an unknown person might be received only on the authorisation of the Ağa of the House of Felicity and threatened severe punishment for any infringement of the rules'.

The eunuchs were responsible for educating the women for the demands of the sultans. The women's education included etiquette, morals, eating with grace, speaking properly, proper behaviour in the sultan's presence and religion. Religion consisted primarily of the women learning a few verses of prayer by heart. The eunuchs instilled in their charges the conviction that the sultans were all-powerful and threatened them, having some of the women believe that if they even had bad thoughts, the eunuchs would strangle them in the night.⁵⁷

The Black eunuchs, as their numbers began to increase, also had their own guild (*ocak*) with posted regulations that explained their ranks and allowances, and established rules of punishment for associated offences. Those offences were 'conduct condemned by religion, ethics and law, or actions contrary to their tasks and to the recommendations of their superiors'. The older members of the 'Eunuchs Guild' also took in the castrated boys, raising and disciplining them. The older men taught the boys the imperial traditions, 'both in theory and in practice'.⁵⁸

Indeed, it was extremely difficult for any woman even to visit the harem for any reason. She would first have to pass through the Court of the Black Eunuchs to reach the inner gates and the Chief Black Eunuch had the authority to stop anyone from proceeding any further. If gaining entry appears difficult, it was even more difficult for Harem women to leave their designated area. One sixteenth-century *Kızlar Ağası*

interpreted his position so strictly that when there was a fire in the harem, he refused to open the gates to allow the women to escape. He waited for orders from the sultan, who responded in time for the women and their maids to flee. The two women who started the fire, possibly to cover thefts, were hanged in sacks 'to avoid obscenities'.⁵⁹

Ottaviano Bon, the Venetian representative to Istanbul, described in detail various harem activities. As senior diplomat, he remained at his post for over two years, returning home in 1607. It was Bon's facility for making friends that enabled him to observe and collect details concerning activities of the palace eunuchs.⁶⁰

Howsoever, married or not married, the mother of the heir is by every one called and acknowledged for Queen, and presented with many rich presents from all great personages; and hath continually, at the gate, a guard of thirty or forty black eunuchs, together with the Kızlar Ağâ their master, whom she commandeth, and employeth in all her occasions; and so do all the other Sultanas, which never stir out of the Seraglio, but in the company of the King himself, who oftentimes carrieth either all, or most of them abroad by water, to his other Seraglios of pleasure: and in those ways through which they pass, to go to and fro from their Kayık [boat], there is canvas pitched up on both sides; and none may come near them but black Eunuchs, till they be settled, and covered close in the room at the stern of the Kayık; and then go in the bargemen; so that, if fine, they are never seen by any men, but by the Grand Seignor only, and the eunuchs.⁶¹

There were other occasions where the women of the harem obtained authorisation to go outside, albeit under tight security. On some religious festivals such as the Night of Power, the women would travel in carriages to the Hippodrome to watch the events from their vehicle windows. In the meantime, the African eunuchs would bring them snacks, ice cream and coffee.⁶²

The estimated numbers of eunuchs attached to the Ottoman Court varied. It would appear that when it was at its peak, there might have been 600 to 800. Chroniclers in the 1500s mentioned 20 to 40, but the harem had not yet expanded. Under Murad III, the number of women reached 1,200 and the number of eunuchs expanded to about 400.

A more recent source has estimated that the total number of eunuchs, both White and Black, numbered 40 under Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520) to 600–800 under Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520–1566). Under sultan Murad III (r. 1574–1595) there were over 1,000. It has only been after the end of the sultanate, when records became available and the actual plans of the imperial palace became known, that figures that are more realistic began to emerge. For instance, 30 eunuchs were required to guard a specific gate alone:⁶³

The work entrusted to the ordinary black eunuchs was chiefly that of guards, not only of the outside and inside doors, but of passages, courtyards, and storerooms. The more personal offices were given either to the very young or to the old and experienced men. It should be realized that the Negro eunuch went through a long and careful training just as the *ajem-oghlans* [apprentice Janissaries] did.⁶⁴

Indeed, the *Kızlar Ağası* supervised half of the Janissaries when they were at the height of their powers. One of the companies of Janissaries was the Woodcutters (*Baltacılar*) who carried wood for the harem and removed rubbish. They had to work at a swift pace and of course, the halls were always cleared of women when they were around. Those working in the harem also had to wear a headgear that included ‘tresses’ (*zülüf*) so that they could not accidentally get a clear view of any woman.⁶⁵ That particular group of Woodcutters (*Zülüflü Baktacı*’ar or, Halberdiers-with-tresses) was one of several groups whose activities went far beyond their title, for they were essentially harem guards.⁶⁶

The diary of Thomas Dallam provides a first-hand account of Sultan Murad III’s court because of his unique assignment from England’s Elizabeth I. He was the first to describe any area of the House of Felicity (Imperial Apartments), as a person not employed in the palace. Queen Elizabeth sent an extremely complex clock to Murad and, along with her gift, sent Dallam to assemble it. This timepiece also had an attached organ that played tunes hourly. However, he almost lost his life while working on the clock/organ in the imperial apartments. In one incident, he described how the African eunuchs almost killed him because no one informed him that the women were entering that part of the imperial apartments.

The incident resulted in one man's firing because he did not tell Dallam about the impending danger. Dallam had parts of the clock scattered over the floor when he noticed that people were running away from the area. Fortunately, he managed to ask one person as he sped by about all of the excitement. The man told him that the sultan and his concubines were entering the apartments and that it would be instant death to anyone caught in the chambers when the entourage came through. Dallam literally ran for his life.

Dallam said, 'I runn as faste as my leggs would carrie me aftere, and 4 neageres or blackamoors cam running towards me with their semetaries drawne; yf they could have catchte me theye would have hewed me all in peecis with there semeteris.'⁶⁸ The eunuchs were not acting out of personal animosity towards Dallam. Rather, they received training, part of their rigorous instruction, on how to protect the women of the harem against any male not officially authorized to be near them.

His description of the sultan and his bodyguards are detailed:

One can see the fat, turbaned and bedizened King, sitting cross-legged on a gaudy cushion in a hall of columns lit by daylight from above. Near him a row of guards dressed in white burnous, red fez and black top-boots, with wicked-looking knives at their belts. Two huge eunuchs flanking a curtained archway that leads to the private apartments and the harem.⁶⁷

Dallam also noted that the Black eunuchs were all 'African Negroes' specifically chosen for service in the harem.

The older eunuchs kept a watchful eye on the boy eunuchs and disciplined them until they reached the age for service. The Chief Black Eunuch placed them under the control of the supervising women of the harem, who themselves were under his command. The young eunuchs had now entered the service of the sultana. They received 'a considerable allowance, of 60 to 100 aspri a day, two robes of finest silk, clothes, and other effects for their needs throughout the year'. They also received other remuneration.⁶⁹

The eunuchs watched the men and boys under their control to ensure that they did not engage in homosexual relations and observed the

women and girls for the same reason. They also had to watch over other eunuchs and pages that might want to form close relationships:

The monotonous life, the absence of male companionship led to many sexual indulgences, including 'love affairs' with eunuchs, all of whom were examined regularly by the palace doctors to make sure that the operation of castration had been perfectly performed. Not only eunuchs but castrated page-boys frequently became the favourites of harem women. These boys had been carefully trained, were always dressed in brilliant silks, and were invariably called by flower names – Hyacinth, Narcissus, Rose, Carnation.⁷⁰

Some of the women resorted to lesbian acts, according to diplomat Ottaviano Bon, just as much as the pages turned to homosexuality. Bon wrote the following about the 'young, lusty and lascivious wenches' in the harem. His paragraph provides some insight into what the Ottomans believed to the 'nature' of young women:

Now, it is not lawful for any one to bring aught in unto them, with which they may commit the deeds of beastly and unnatural uncleanness; so that if they have a will to eat radishes, cucumbers, gourds, or such like meats; they are sent in unto them sliced, to deprive them of the means of playing the wantons: for they being all young, lusty, and lascivious wenches, and wanting the society of men, which would better instruct them, and questionless far better employ; them are doubtless of themselves inclined to that which is naught, and will often be possess'd with unchaste thoughts.⁷¹

A more recent writer, Alev Lytle Croutier, also presented her interpretation on why many Muslims rationalized the separation of women. She found that in many ways the reasons echoed those of Bon. Some arguments reiterate the creation of men and women. According to some, God created men but women were created from the flesh and the body of a man (in Judaism and Christianity, this would be Adam's rib). Passion and lust dominate women's bodies and, therefore, they might even have intercourse with Satan. Men could have sexual freedom while women could not be 'whole' until married. Under Islam, women could

be segregated, veiled and kept away from all men except male relatives because of their supposedly seductive powers. They would also need secluded dwelling places to preserve male morality, according to those interpreting Islam in that fashion.⁷²

The African eunuchs guarding the sultan and the imperial household held the following titles, based on seniority. Because a eunuch's seniority depended on the date, someone entered their names in the palace register; those who reached the ranks of *ortancı* or *hasılı* could be quite elderly. The ranks and their descriptions are as follows:

- (1) *En Aşağı* – the lowest rank. It was the title bestowed upon the most recently arrived eunuch. The *En Aşağı* was first presented to the *Kızlar Ağa* and then taken to his *Oda Lalası*, supervisor of the *Kızlar Ağa*'s apartments. The *Oda Lalası* introduced the *En Aşağı* to the principle officer of the eunuch guard where his name was entered in the palace rolls. The *En Aşağı* had to kiss the hand of a lieutenant of the *Ortancı* or the *Hasılı*, who became his supervisor or *lala*. His job was to serve the *Acemi* and their sub-officers, the *Substitutes of the Watch* (*Nevbet Kalfasis*). Since the *Nevbet Kalfasis* were in charge of the eunuchs on duty at the doors of the Harem, he placed the *En Aşağı* on guard duty during the hours of ablution and prayer. He spent the rest of his time learning about the estate.
- (2) *Acemi* – novice or apprentice *ğa*. As soon as a new eunuch entered the service, the *En Aşağı* moved up to the rank of *Acemi* (*Foreign Ağa*). One could receive a promotion to the next rank when a vacancy occurred, based on seniority.
- (3) *Kapu oğlan* or *Nevbet Kalfasis* – page (duty assistant master). There were five *Nevbet Kalfasis* ranked by seniority. The fifth and most senior eunuch controlled the others and only did guard duty when the sultan and the harem women went on an outing. The others were in charge of the harem door keys for the four doors. Two of the doors were iron and two were bronze, spaced along a single passageway. The *Kızlar Ağası* gave the *Nevbet Kalfasis* the keys in the early morning and they returned them to him at night.
- (4) *Ortancı* – middle rank (middle). Four in number, those sub-officers could refuse to accept the promotion of an inferior to their rank. When promoted, the *Kızlar Ağası* received him and the *Ortancı*

kissed his robe. Afterward he went to the eunuch mosque and distributed his gifts.

- (5) *Hasıl* – highest rank (master). Twelve eunuchs comprised that rank and the senior one could rise to become second officer of the guard (*Yaylak Baş Kapı Gulami*, or Summer Head Slave of the Door). Upon a vacancy, the latter could rise to become first officer or, *Yeni Serai Baş Kapı Gulami* (Head Slave of the Door of the New Palace). The two *Baş Kapı Gulami* positions were the highest to which a eunuch could rise through seniority.⁷³

The chief of the guard and eunuchs outside of the above ranks were chosen from the *hasıl*. The chief of the guard's assistant (Summer Head Slave of the Gate) stood in when he was away. Within the hierarchy, the chief of the guard was the highest position the eunuchs could attain. The Chief Black Eunuch (*Ağa of the House of Felicity*) filled other appointments as necessary, such as the eunuch imam for the harem or the courtiers.

Each prince or *şehzade* old enough to have his own apartment had a Black eunuch *lala*, a tutor or high-ranking manservant who supervised him. The valide sultan, the married princesses and the *kadın*s had a chief *ağa* with a staff, all under the command of the Chief Black Eunuch, who had a staff of his own. The *Oda Lalası*, Supervisor of the Room, headed the staff and took charge of the harem in the Chief Black Eunuch's absence.⁷⁴

Promotion was a painfully slow process that depended on the death of older eunuchs. They rarely retired and 'the majority were middle-aged and dignified, while some were so old their faces had shriveled with time'.⁷⁵ The new recruits that the chief eunuchs favoured served them as valets, cooks or coffee makers.⁷⁶ Both the young Black and White eunuchs received the same education as the pages in the palace school.⁷⁷ Some of the older eunuchs developed more than a friendship with their charges:

Apart from those older eunuchs who devolved the most menial tasks onto the recruits, there were boys for whom other older eunuchs developed an affection that led to cuddling, curdled by frustration. It must be remembered, however, that emasculated

men retain their emotions and there were bitter rivalries over the affections of the beautiful women whom they frequently served.⁷⁸

The title of all Black eunuchs was mostly ağa, no matter what their level. When they achieved the rank of ortancı, they organized a banquet for the Chief Black Eunuch. Musabibs (Black eunuchs who transmitted the sultan's orders), başilis and other ortancı received an invitation. The new ortancı also gave select banquet food to his mistress, the kalfas (senior slaves) to whom he was attached at the Sarayı and to the Chief Black Eunuch and the First Musahib, or sultan's favourite page. Other ağalar attended, sitting at small tables. The new ortancı also received gifts.

Eunuchs in charge of the cadets treated their charges severely, punishing them for the smallest infractions. Punishments would include forced fasting or hard blows to the bottom of the feet. One chauvinist writer wondered if they were cruel because they envied the 'perfect male' or because 'they resemble the natures of women, which is many times more spiteful than men'. When the men finished their training and became officers, they were 'patient of all labours, services and injunctions imposed on them by their future superiors'. Turks believed that instead of turning out students who were too submissive, they produced leaders who knew better how to govern because they first learned to obey.⁷⁹ However, when the White eunuchs were in charge of the training, they were so severe that an enacted rule finally stated that the beating of pages was to be no more than 100 strokes.⁸⁰

Eunuchs watched the personal manners and movements of the cadets during their training period. The cadets could not be too familiar with each other and 'if they wished to perform the offices of nature, they are always accompanied by a eunuch'. Their dormitories were long chambers with night lamps burning to keep them under observation. Their beds were in rows and between every five or six lay a eunuch to ensure that there was 'no wanton or lewd behaviour between the young men'. When they became competent in their basic training, 'and almost to Man's Estate and strength of body', the cadets were trained in using the lance, throwing iron darts and drawing the bow. Eunuchs taught them all those exercises.⁸¹

Guardians, Lovers and Friends

While much of the history of the palace eunuchs as guardians has focused on safeguarding the women, it omits a very important role and therefore, overlooks the powers they accumulated. The Black eunuchs closely guarded the sultan, even from members of his own household. Because they became his exclusive mediators, they could control information and even influence sultans' decisions. If the sultans, for instance, were crossing from one side of the palace to the other, it was the eunuchs who monitored the movements and only they held the keys to lock and unlock the doors. Besides the Chief Black Eunuch and his agents, only the valide sultan had direct access to her son. All other members of the imperial family were kept under strict supervision, assuring that the power of the eunuchs was preserved and people kept within prescribed boundaries.⁸²

The court physician was one of the only men allowed inside the harem but even he 'could be summoned only in case of the greatest emergencies and with the permission of the sultan or of the chief black eunuch'. Even the women of the royal family did not have automatic access to the harem and women who were blood relatives of the sultan could only enter with his permission.⁸³ There were other women who conducted business with harem women, such as saleswomen, jewel merchants, those selling embroidering and similar items, but they could only have access into an outer room and were under constant guard of the Black eunuchs.⁸⁴ All messages, gifts and business transactions had to go through the Chief Black Eunuch and even Ottoman dignitaries had to provide him with offerings.⁸⁵ Because of the controls the Chief Black Eunuchs exploited, they were able to effect organisational and political power far beyond what their titles implied.

The Guards of the Halvet were the eunuchs of the harem whose assignments were to oversee men entering the outer areas of the harem, including those who led the oxen that carried firewood for the laundry. They also accompanied the doctors and other visitors, including locksmiths and carpenters. Poet Leyla Hanım (Moralizade) wrote that there were eunuchs who accompanied the music and dance teachers and who watched the lessons and rehearsals. Selim III brought a French dance master and musicians to outer buildings of the harem to teach the female slaves selected to act in a private burlesque. Those female slaves were not Muslim because Islam frowned on those types of dances.⁸⁶

Eunuchs were allowed to enter the harem at any hour of the day or night as long as the doors were open. Usually the doors were locked from three hours after sunset, so they had to leave since they were not allowed to remain in the women's quarters overnight.⁸⁷ Leyla Hanım described some of the African eunuchs who impressed her:

Among those whom I knew I must mention Amber Ağa, nicknamed Amber the Long, who was brought up in the Serail of Esma Sultane, sister of Sultan Mahmud II. He also was in the service of Adile Sultane, daughter of Sultan Mahmud II, who was a distinguished and refined princess. For many years he filled the functions of the first ağa at the court of Fatma Sultane, the oldest daughter of Sultan Abdülmecid, who was the most educated princess of her time. Amber Ağa became refined in the service of his mistresses; he was a distinguished poet, he sang very well and his conversation was most agreeable and full of wit. Rasim Ağa, the first musahib of Sultan Abdülmecid, was a great conversationalist; Ferhad Ağa was a fine musician. But the most remarkable among the eunuchs I knew was certainly Muhterem Ağa who was in the service of Sultane. Before entering the Serail, Muhterem Ağa had received an excellent education and an extensive upbringing in the house of Fuad Paşa where he had grown up. He became even more refined and educated in the service of the brilliant Sultane, his mistress.⁸⁸

Leyla Hanım wrote respectfully about the African eunuchs. She noted that even when education was limited to many, the eunuchs displayed impeccable manners. Muhterem Ağa understood Turkish, Arabic and Persian, as well as some French and Greek. One was a professor, another a master musician and others were secretaries. Some raised horses, cows, sheep and goats while others were landlords and landholders. She knew some who had their own servants and stables. They got along well with other people and annoyed no one unless someone infringed on their jobs, at which time they became fierce.

Malik-Khanam described some of her eunuch friends, who seemed to impress her. She reported that both the palace ladies and the eunuchs of the seraglio seemed more sincere than townspeople. Though her friends lived depressed lives, they were very charming:

Among the eunuchs, moreover, I found friends whose company gave me pleasure, in that some of them were accomplished poets and musicians. Ferhad-Agha, for example, combined both these qualities. He was a genuine troubadour, whose chivalrous sentiments and gayety of heart repelled every thing that was ignoble, or that savored of spleen. His besetting weakness, however, was a love of *raki*; but this was only natural: from all time, Bacchus and the Muses have dwelt together in harmony.⁸⁹

The descriptions that Leyla Hanım and Malik-Khanam provided contrast sharply with one that an historian presented who never knew their world. However, that historian probably revealed more of himself in his vituperation than he realized. The Ottoman eunuchs did gain a lot of control and influence, but they also had great responsibilities. If they actually functioned as ineptly as this writer believed they did, the sultans would probably have eliminated them from their household:

In general, however, they produced an atmosphere as clamorous, futile, and clammy as is to be found, in our day, at any vernissage in the art world, intrigued with just as much malice to as little purpose, and their whole endeavour was much the same, i.e. to dine with the duchess and put the prices up.⁹⁰

Many Ottomans reviled the eunuchs, as did many Byzantines, particularly the elite. Those attitudes probably stemmed from 'their physical condition, their lowly origin, but perhaps most of all from the perceived influence of the court eunuchs over the figure of the emperor himself'. Officials simply did not like the fact that there was a barrier between themselves and their sovereign.⁹¹

Another stereotype that Leyla Hanım countered is that eunuchs were incapable of having any longing for a love life or even marriage. While probably most men castrated at a young age lost sexual drive, some not only retained theirs but also increased it, so it appears. Their libido still operated and some could still appreciate women and even managed to have a sex life. The eighteenth century Turkish chronicler, Ali Seydi Bey, related a story about the eunuchs, told to him by one of the palace guards:

I am a witness to the fact that these black infidels are so traitorous that they may fall in love with one of the odalisques and spend all that they earn on them. At every opportunity they meet secretly and make love. You might ask, do the odalisques who establish relations with these black eunuchs find pleasure in them? It is notorious in Istanbul that the odalisques find such pleasure. Two halberdiers of our unit who married odalisques from the imperial palace divorced them within the week when the odalisques told their husbands: 'we do not enjoy relations with you as we did with the black eunuchs.'⁹²

It seemed that some eunuchs were perfectly capable of sexually satisfying certain women. Besides, although sex is an important aspect of a relationship, some women are not as sexually active as others and some eunuchs seemed to have been sexually creative:

Finally, singular as it may seem, there were also eunuchs who married and who bought odaliks. Many foreigners, and even Turks, have imagined that eunuchs were ferocious, full of hatred and of contempt towards men; that they were violently resentful of the world. All such impressions on this subject are quite erroneous. The poor eunuchs of the Serail never deserved this reputation of wickedness and ferocity. These unfortunate beings were only sought out and taken from their countries to be employed as barriers between the harem and the selamlık [men's quarters], between women and men. It was uniquely for this purpose they had been bought, not only for the Palace, but also by rich individuals and their duties were limited to exactly that.⁹³

Famous novelist William Makepeace Thackeray impulsively took an unanticipated opportunity to travel in August 1844. Sailing from Southampton, he journeyed to Cairo and Istanbul, among other cities. While in Istanbul he wrote a brief account on observing Sultan Abdülmecid I and his retinue arriving at the mosque at Tophane, perhaps the Kılıç Ali Paşa Camii that Sinan built. It was Ramadan and the streets were crowded waiting for the sultan with petitions. Besides the soldiers and the police were other officials as well:

Before the august arrival, numerous officers collected, colonels and paşas went by with their attendant running footmen; the most active, insolent, and hideous of these great men, as I thought, being his Highness's black eunuchs, who went prancing through the crowd, which separated before them with every sign of respect.⁹⁴

Thackeray reiterated his view that the eunuchs were ugly when he opined about those tightly encircling the sultan. According to him, those surrounding Abdülmecid constantly lied to him and kept the truth away from him. Thackeray also believed the sultan to be visually impaired because he could only see the world 'over the shoulders of a row of fat paşas, and eunuchs, with their infernal ugliness'.⁹⁵ However, his stereotypes seem consistent with the negative ones that he held of Black slave women.

The first medical observations of Ottoman court eunuchs, made in 1901, lent some scientific insight into some physical conditions of the men. The researchers noted that the men's breasts were large and pendulous, a condition known as gynaecomastia. They further noted that the prostate glands atrophied. During World War I, Dr Ferdinand Wagenseil of the German Red Cross Hospital at Istanbul cared for a 40-year-old eunuch who probably died of typhus. Subsequently, he studied ten others, born in Ethiopia or Sudan, whose average age was 44 and whose average duration of castration was 34 years. Most had problems voiding their bladders. Wagenseil performed detailed anthropological measurements on each of the men, which included physical examinations and skull x-rays of four of them.⁹⁶

Eunuchs also died young from tuberculosis because they were not able to adapt to Istanbul's climate and the lack of healthy life conditions. This may have stemmed from the fact that they were mostly indoors.⁹⁷ Doctors have noted that people living and working together in confined spaces without adequate air circulation can quickly spread that debilitating disease within populations.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, there seemed to be only a few eunuchs imported into the Ottoman Empire and almost all of them were from Africa. Their prices were so high that only the imperial family and other wealthy people could afford them. Mostly Africans, they were gifts rather than purchases. The imperial family kept records of the

numbers they had in service and the register shows their number in 1903 to be 194. Many of them had been manumitted by that time, but continued to serve their former mistresses and masters in their previous capacities.⁹⁸ The Imperial eunuchs of 1903 served at four of the homes and palaces of the royal family. They were 'Yıldız (main harem), Beşiktaş, Topkapı and Çit':

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were 31 eunuchs serving at Yıldız, the abode of the Sultan, his mother, and his wives. At the auxiliaries to the main Harem in Beşiktaş, Topkapı and Çit, we note 19, 6, and 18 eunuchs respectively. The remaining 120 were divided among 13 princes and 11 princesses, whose suites were located in the various wings of Yıldız and Beşiktaş, as well as in a number of royal mansions in and around the capital. The largest suite, that of the Crown Prince, employed ten eunuchs, as did the suite of Abdül Hamit II's eldest daughter. Lesser members of the Ottoman Family normally employed half that number.⁹⁹

With the official outlawing of harems in 1909, the eunuchs began to disappear. A few managed to remain in attendance to harem women who had no relatives while others slowly lived out their lives in Istanbul, symbols of a past that most people wanted to forget. The government did attempt to contact the families of harem women and connect them and to that end were relatively successful. There are stories of the joyful reuniting of families and the Georgian and Circassian harem women with their possessions happily and hastily leaving. Were the harems as wonderful for the odalisques as some have depicted them and others continue to depict them, or were they just ecstatic to reunite with their families?

The contrast between the delicate complexions and costly attire of the women and the rough, weather-beaten appearance of the ill-clad mountaineers who had come to fetch them home was not the least striking feature of the extraordinary scene; and in some instances the poor relatives were quite dazzled by the beautiful faces, the graceful manners, and the rich apparel of their kinswomen. The latter seemed all very glad, however, to get away;

and as a rule they lost no time in packing their trunks and departing, sometimes after a very affectionate leave-taking of the other odalisques. The number of slaves thus liberated was two hundred and thirteen.¹⁰⁰

However, some women had no living relatives that could be located or their families may have moved, died off or simply rejected them. Like the eunuchs and other African male and female slaves, there were no relatives waiting for them to take them home. Others came looking for the women but could not locate them. In some cases the 'girls had died, some had been put to death by Abdül Hamit, and others of them, after Abdül Hamit's fall, had been brought with him to Salonika by the ex-sultan or quietly draughted into the harems of imperial princes who had taken a fancy to them'. The state agreed to pension the 'abandoned ones' until they married but because many of them were older, realistically, people knew that it probably would not happen. To writer McCullagh, that was obvious 'as if any man in his senses would take to wife a middle-aged woman who had been trained in the imperial harem and who had no longer any influence at Court!'¹⁰¹ It appears that some of the eunuchs still saw fit to continue their duties and attached themselves to certain women and their families or to 'abandoned ones'. From a photograph in Croutier's book, it appeared that at least six unclaimed members of the harem and two eunuchs were 'on their way to Vienna to exhibit themselves' as a way of earning a living.¹⁰²

Author Alev Lytle Croutier offers a more contemporary observation of an African eunuch, Süleyman Ağa. Her grandmother, raised in a harem, was one of the last women of Istanbul to live in one. While living in Izmir during the late 1940s as a child, Croutier remembered her eunuch friend as 'a gingerbread-coloured man without hair on his face, so that he looked much younger than he was'. He always gave Croutier gifts and once while sitting on his lap, he slowly placed pretty rings on each of her fingers, causing her to observe 'no one has since spoiled me to that degree'. Süleyman Ağa continued to visit the family after they moved to Ankara, always bringing candy for little Alev. It appears that Süleyman Ağa may have been, on some level, continuing a relationship with the grandmother that began years earlier in the harem when he may have been one of her guards.

Croutier also noted that Süleyman Ağa had a high-pitched voice and 'seemed more like a woman than a man' and had an hourglass figure as well. Her mother mentioned that he was a eunuch but that the word meant 'beardless'. Her mother was not lying, as 'beardless' was a synonym for eunuch, referring to a eunuch's lack of the ability for being able to grow a beard, and for not having the 'equipment' to generate a beard. She once heard her father say that there were not many eunuchs left and, when they died, 'it will be the close of an embarrassing era'. She was nine when her childhood friend Süleyman Ağa died, but she retained many fond memories of him, memories that do not reinforce the negative perceptions about eunuchs.¹⁰³

The end of the Ottoman Empire also meant that there was no further need for royal eunuchs and all obtained their freedom following World War I. In 1924, a group of them collectively purchased a house in Istanbul to spend their retirement. Another colony lived on the Asian side of Istanbul in the Çamlıca heights above Üsküdar. They lived out their remaining years in relative obscurity while some who had attended to children retained those relationships.¹⁰⁴ Yet, the spirit of the eunuchs still lives on today in films, books and other entertainment forms. Croutier tells her readers that those images certainly did not resemble her friend. According to her, 'They [film eunuchs] are often played by beautifully muscled, athletic, and semi-naked Black men with gorgeous turbans and flashy daggers, but they are so unlike Süleyman Ağa that it is hard to imagine the word eunuch describes both.'¹⁰⁵

There are not many observations of African eunuchs unless they were with the sultan's harem. In Istanbul during the reign of Abdül Aziz (1861–1876) was Italian writer Edmondo De Amicis, who recorded very detailed descriptions and impressions of the sights and sounds of the city. He also recorded stories told to him about the Black eunuchs but also had the opportunity to see some firsthand. From his descriptions, there seemed to be quite a number of them around the city and he wrote, 'These unfortunates are to be met at every step in the streets, as they are found on every page of history.' In two rather lengthy but illustrative quotes he continued:

So now in Constantinople, in the midst of the busy crowd, in the bazaars, among the merry multitude at the Sweet Waters, under

the arches of the mosques, beside carriages, in the steamers and caiques, at all the feasts, in all the crowds, is seen this semblance of a man, this doleful figure, whose presence makes a dark, lugubrious stain upon the smiling aspect of Oriental life. Their political importance has diminished with the omnipotence of the court, and as Oriental jealousy relaxes, their consequence in private houses has also much declined; it is difficult for them now to find in riches and domination, a compensation for their misfortune; no Ghaznefer Ağa [Gazanfer Ağa] could now be found to consent to mutilation in order to be made chief of the white eunuchs; they are all in these days most certainly victims, and victims without hope of redress; bought or stolen as children in Abyssinia or in Syria, about one in three survives the infamous knife, and he is sold in defiance of the law, with a hypocrisy of secrecy more odious than an open market.¹⁰⁶

De Amicis observed that one easily recognized eunuchs because they were ‘tall, fat and flabby, with beardless, withered faces, short bodied, and long in the legs and arms’, which coincides with other depictions. He also reported on their dress that included a scarlet fez, a dark frock coat with European trousers and a hippopotamus whip. They could seem intimidating if anyone seemed to pay too much attention to the women that they escorted:

They accompany the ladies on foot or on horseback, either before or behind the carriage, sometimes one, sometimes two together, and keep a vigilant eye about them, which at the least irreverent look or action in the passer by, assumes an expression of ferocious anger.¹⁰⁷

The eunuchs’ search for female companionship did not escape De Amicis’ notice, but he probably based those accounts on someone else’s observations or stories. In any case, his story seemed to verify the assertion that although the eunuchs were emasculated, some still maintained desire for female companionship and for creating a family. He also depicted men who could acquire the trappings of family, but who lived a life of despair, knowing that the option of spawning families by themselves was impossible:

But however debased they may be, the need of woman's companionship is still powerful with them, and since they may not have a wife, they seek her as a friend; they marry; choosing a woman with child, like Sunbullu [Sünbül Ağâ], the chief eunuch of İbrahim First, in order to have a child to love; they have a harem of virgins, like the chief eunuch of Ahmed Second, in order to have beauty and grace about them, a semblance of affection, an illusion of love; they adopt a daughter, to have a woman's breast on which to rest their head when old, so as not to die without one caress, and to hear in their last years a kind and loving voice, after having heard throughout their lives nothing but the ironical laugh of contempt; and there are those among them, who having become rich at the court and in the great houses, purchase when they are old, a pretty villa on the Bosphorus, and there try to forget, to deaden the remembrance of their own wretchedness in the gayety of feasts and guests.¹⁰⁸

De Amicis related a story told to him by a physician in Pera that deeply affected both men. Within this passage, one can hear the anguished cry of someone who could live in a world that denied him important domestic elements. It was a world where a doctor might cure people, excluding the eunuchs. This tale so bothered De Amicis that he made a plea to the leaders of Islam to end that 'bloody infamy':

One evening [...] I was coming out of a rich Mussulman's house, where I had gone for the third time to visit one of his wives, who had disease of the heart. At my departure, as at my arrival, I was accompanied by a eunuch, calling out in the customary way: 'Women, withdraw,' in order to warn ladies and slaves that a stranger is in the harem, and that they must not be seen. In the courtyard the eunuch left me, to find my own way to the gate. Just as I was about to open it, I felt a touch upon my arm, and turning, saw before me in the twilight another eunuch, a young man of eighteen or twenty years of age, who looked fixedly at me, with eyes swimming with tears. I asked him what he wished. He hesitated a moment to reply, and then seizing my hand in both of his, and pressing it convulsively, he said in a trembling voice, full of despairing grief: 'Doctor! you who know the remedy for every ill, do

you know of none for mine?’ I cannot tell you how those simple words affected me; I tried to answer, but my voice failed me, and hastily opening the door, I took to flight. But all that evening, and for many days after, the figure of the youth stood before me and I heard his words, and my eyes moistened with compassion.¹⁰⁹

The city with the greatest number of eunuchs seemed to be Istanbul, even though the period dubbed the ‘Sultanate of the African eunuchs’ supposedly ended by the late eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, almost all of the Istanbul eunuchs were Africans and there were almost no Circassian eunuchs. British and other Western reforms led to the decline of the use of eunuchs but it continued into the early twentieth century in the Ottoman palace. In fact, the imperial household saw an increase in the acquisition of castrated African slaves at the end of the nineteenth century. The reason may have been to ‘stock up’ since the rulers knew that the supply would soon disappear.¹¹⁰

Historian Fannie Davis, author of *The Palace of Topkapı in Istanbul*, had the following to say about the African eunuchs:

These eunuchs, at least the black ones, seem to have been all kinds of people. Some took to learning and literature, some undoubtedly remained ignorant, but all became Muslims and devout. I once met a black eunuch who had been in the service of the last sultan. He was a gentle, soft-spoken man who had become a mystic.¹¹¹

CHAPTER 6

THE POWER OF THE CHIEF BLACK EUNUCHS

Before the rise of the Chief Black Eunuchs, White eunuchs held sway in the Empire and observers described some of them as they would later describe their successors. For instance, Cafer Ağa (1555–1557), attendant to Sultan Süleyman I, owned 39 books ‘in addition to various other riches such as textiles, precious stones, and furs’.¹ He was interested in various topics such as history, Persian poetry and religious studies as well as early Islamic history and Islam’s holy places.² Because the White eunuchs were guardians of burial sites, including that of the Prophet’s tomb in Medina, they were able to move between the worlds of the living and the dead. Like their Black counterparts who later seized power, they were also able to negotiate the worlds of both men and women in the palace.³

A Venetian envoy described a procession led by Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–1566) as he proceeded to his Friday prayers. He noted the horses, elephants, Circassian virgins, Janissaries in white turbans, ambassadors in scarlet and gold, along with their escorts, the Grand Vizier, the Chief Cook, the Chief Armourer carrying the sultan’s saber, the Chief Huntsman, the overseers of the sultan’s perfumes, the Chief Keeper of the Nightingales, the Custodian of the Heron’s Plume and hundreds of others dressed in specific clothes of particular colours. There was one person who stood out from the rest:

Above all towered the one man who, apart from the Sultan, was feared by all, the Chief Black Eunuch, the Kızlar Ağa, literally

'Master of the Girls.' He was a man of immense power and wealth – entitled to his own retinue of slaves – for he was in control of the harem and was its only link with the outside world. He waited, a grotesque, ugly, castrated man, by the Gate of Felicity, dressed in his ceremonial robes of flowered silk and broad sash, his sable-trimmed pelisse reaching almost to the ground, and on his head a cylindrical headdress twenty-five inches high, shaped like a sugar loaf. Yet for all this display of ostentation the Kızlar Ağası was a man who had been castrated in Africa, sold as a slave for a few piastres and, despite the power he wielded, was crude, ignorant, corrupt and, because of his physical state, often dangerously capricious.⁴

The root of the word 'kızlar' is 'kız', which formerly referred to a girl or an unmarried woman. When used in a more restrictive sense it also meant daughter, slave girl or concubine. The mediaeval Islamic use of 'kız' also referred to a Christian woman, and therefore relates to the meaning of slave and concubine. Under the Ottomans, the word 'kız' became associated with the chief of the African eunuchs of the Imperial Palace.⁵ Many feared the Chief Black Eunuch (Kızlar Ağası, Dar üs-Saade Ağası, or Ağası of the House of Felicity) almost as much as the sultan, looking down upon him because of his position and, sometimes, out of jealousy. It is difficult to discern the complete truth about the Chief Black Eunuch, perhaps because each one may have exhibited different behaviours. It appears that most were very religious Muslims, as seen from their concern over mosques. When Selim III appointed his Chief Black Eunuch to be his tutor when a prince, the text that he used demonstrated the African's power:

You who are my noble Ağası of the House of Felicity, Bilâl Ağası, because you have for some time been my supporting slave and faithful and beloved lâla [...] I honour you from all my slaves and appoint you Ağası of the House of Felicity and overseer of the Holy Cities [Mecca and Medina]. I appoint you officer over all the small and great and young and old of all groups of ağas of the imperial harem and of the halberdiers of the Old Palace and the Guardians of the Walnut Tree [Koz Bekçileri], and all of the servants of the Holy Cities know you are the master in all matters

and affairs, and no one will act except you say so, and they will obey you completely [...].⁶

There are many descriptions of eunuchs and some contradict each other. One Egyptian doctor, Zambaco, had several Ottoman eunuchs as patients. He not only related the physical aspects of his charges, but also their psychological and social attitudes. Further, he provided an explanation regarding why certain eunuchs constructed mosques and conducted other works of charity. He hypothesized the following:

Eunuchs of the palace [...] were usually well bred and exquisitely polite; loving luxury they often owned jewellery of considerable value, and some even amassed fortunes through the generosity of their master or mistress with which they could afford to have mosques constructed or to invest in considerable philanthropic works, for the benefit, naturally, of their souls in a life to come – especially as everything they possessed in this one reverted to their owner at death.⁷

Dr Zambaco also recorded the social and religious lives of the eunuchs. Many read the Qur'an and prayed, conforming to Islamic dictates. Many were well educated but appeared to become angry very easily. While riding on their horses, accompanying the sultan or the sultan's women, they would whip anyone with their hippopotamus whips who they thought were trying to peep at the veiled women. Dr Zambaco diagnosed their actions as manic:

Describing eunuchs in the sultan's palace at Constantinople, which he visited, the doctor remarked that they led a pleasant happy life, especially the favourites in the harem, loving horses, jewellery, wigs, perfume, children and cock fights, and giving themselves a great deal of importance. Having reached a certain age, however, they were inclined to become bigoted, passing their time reading religious books and saying prayers in order to prepare themselves an indemnity in future life for the privations received in this one, to the point, says he, of becoming religious fanatics. Nor is it surprising, adds the doctor, that 'those who have been deprived of the gift of procreation should devote themselves to a cult which

promises them all manner of satisfaction in the way of luscious semi-naked damsels in an Islamic paradise to come.⁸

It was during the reign of Murad III (1574–1595) that the Chief Black Eunuch became the most powerful person in the Inner Service of the sultan. Under the establishment of the new division of the Ağa of Dârüssâdeti's-Serife, the Chief Black Eunuch obtained as much power as a vizier. Mehmed Ağa (1574–1590) became the first ağa of that division through his close relationship with the sultan. Mehmed Ağa (Habeşi) was educated in the palace but, due to his loyalty to the sultan, he received his appointment to chief officer of the palace in 1574. Before then, the Chief White Eunuch had held that position and also oversaw religious endowments (*wafqs*). During 1582 Mehmed Ağa received the authority to reorganize the eunuch power structure so that, for almost 300 years, the Chief Black Eunuch's power might be second only to the sultan.⁹

The reason for the rise in power of the Chief Black Eunuch was centred on the desire of Sultan Murad III to consolidate and extend his powers. Murad either created or strengthened the post of Ağa of Dârüssâdeti's-Serife in 1575 because he was having problems with Chief White Eunuch Ganzanfer Ağa. Through his strong political networks, Ganzanfer became a power broker through his strong political connections and, therefore, was able to challenge the sultan, which is why Sultan Murad and Mehmed Ağa bided their time until Ganzanfer's death.¹⁰

In her detailed analysis of that era, Yıldız Karakoç noted that Murad appointed nine Grand Viziers in 15 years. Since the Chief Black Eunuch now was closely associated with the sultan's family, the sultan's influence was increased. The White eunuchs had created their own centres of powers that could counter and sometimes thwart the wishes of the sultans. The office of the vizier was invested with certain powers but the expanded role of the Chief Black Eunuch meant that the latter could develop new political networks and alliances on behalf of the sultan as well as his family. Further, future viziers were sometimes apprentices or at some point in their training, worked closely with the Chief Black Eunuch. The new arrangement meant that the sultan as well as the Chief Black Eunuch could prepare the future candidate in a way that he would be more liable to accede to the wishes of the sultan.

Many appointments in Ottoman political office were based on patron-client relationships. Now, the imperial palace became the locus of control and, because of the daily contacts between the sultan and the Chief Black Eunuch, the power of the Grand Vizier was reduced to a certain extent. Further, the promotion of the Chief Black Eunuch to be the supervisor of vakıfs; selector, educator and trainer of the harem women; plus manager and administrator of the imperial harem also meant that the sultan had oversight in those areas but the Chief Black Eunuch could sometimes be 'the power behind the throne':¹¹

[...] it can be said that the transfer of power commenced a new period both for the white and black eunuchs: while the former began to disappear from the harem, the latter began to play more vital roles at the central stage of politics as the most important official of the palace.¹²

Not only was the Chief Black Eunuch the trainer and educator of harem women, but they were also among the few palace ağas who were allowed to have female slaves in his personal service. His assistant, the Hazinedar Başı (Head of the Treasury), was allowed female personal slaves as well. Because the latter might rise to be Chief Black Eunuch, that seems to be a rational decision. Under Sultan Mahmud I (1730–1754), records show that the Chief Black Eunuch had five female slaves while the Hazinedar Başı had four. The number remained unchanged under Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839).¹³

Mehmed Ağa established the Ministry of Pious Foundations and oversaw the vakıf of the two Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina. During his reign the Chief Black Eunuchs increasingly became the mediators between the sultans and their courts. Mehmed Ağa died in 1590–1591 of stomach disease and lies buried at a mosque that he constructed in Çarşamba (Wednesday Quarter).

On the Mehmed Ağa Camii Sok (Street) lies the small mosque from which the street received its name, while nearby is a double bath with male and female sections. The architect was Davud Ağa, who succeeded the illustrious Sinan as Chief Imperial Architect. Built in 1585, the türbe of the founder is located in a small square building on the site.¹⁴ Not only is the mosque impressive, but it is also domed. Previously, unless the royal family erected a mosque, it had no dome. The way in

which this mosque was constructed breached decorum yet did not seem to offend the sultan. Seemingly not a modest man in demonstrating his piety, Mehmed Ağa also revealed the power he held.¹⁵

Those following him in office in a sense inherited Mehmed Ağa's expansion of power. He supervised the harem, forged a relationship with Valide Sultan Nurbanu, Safiye, the sultan's favourite, plus the sultan's unmarried daughters. He supervised the pious foundations and had his own house outside the palace grounds. Mehmed Ağa forged a strong relationship with the ulema through endowing a religious college in 1582 and arranging for his protégés to be the college's professors. Some of them rose to high positions in the Ottoman educational hierarchy:

Thus, Mehmet Agha had forged the connexions necessary to sponsor careers among the ulema as well, a telling example being Mullah Ali, an African slave, who even eventually became chief justice of the European province in 1621.¹⁶

In 1613, Sultan Ahmed I decided to levy a poll tax on foreigners in Istanbul that included foreign ambassadors and merchants. The resident Venetian ambassador asked the Grand Admiral of the Ottoman Navy to intercede on his behalf, and the admiral met with the judge of the court of Galata, who refused to budge on the matter. One Venetian merchant was even goaled for a few days for not paying the tax. The British ambassador, Paul Pindar, in writing about the situation, referred to the unyielding judge as 'a black Moore' while a contemporary called him a 'Cadi Negro'. It was very unusual for Europeans to be 'bossed around' by an African during this time, as it was exceptional for an African to have a high position in the Ottoman central administration outside palace positions. The judge, of course, was Mullah Ali (Ali Efendi) before becoming a chief justice.¹⁷

Some of Mehmed Ağa's other clients attained powerful positions within the government while others who were his apprentices became viziers and officials as well. Others worked on a tower and bridge that he funded in İsmail, a village south of Belgrade near the mouth of the Danube off the Black Sea.

The Chief Black Eunuchs had a private apartment inside the entrance to the Harem from the Third Gate, where the young princes received tutoring before they reached puberty. Though small, it had a

coffee room, bedroom, smoking room and lavatory. The other eunuchs lived in the three-storey barracks inside the Carriage Gate (Araba Kapısı). The Carriage Gate has important significance and Mehmed Ağa supervised its construction. While the Bâbüssâde Gate was guarded by an ostentatious contingent of White eunuchs and perceived as the entrance to the sultans' harem, it was the unassuming Carriage Gate, seemingly guarded by just a few Black eunuchs, that was the true entrance.

Venetian Ottaviano Bon noted that both Black and White eunuchs were educated in the palace school along with other students. He also furnished names given to the African eunuchs: 'They were named by the names of flowers, as Hyacinth, Narcissus, Rose, Gillyflower, and the like. For that, serving the women, and always near about them, their names may be answerable to their virginity, sweet and undefiled.'¹⁸

Mehmed Ağa was also a patron who assisted in the creation of manuscripts that helped to define the sultanate as being inspired by God. He supervised the publication of books such as the *Zübdetü't-tevārîh* (*The Quintessence of Histories*) that esteemed the sultan in the same manner as one would esteem a prophet.¹⁹ He also 'traced' the Ottoman dynasty back to Noah!²⁰

In another book Mehmed Ağa supervised, the *Shāhanshāhnāma* (*Book of the King of Kings*), the focus was supposed to be on the military elite but instead, it emphasized the life of Sultan Murad III. Yet, Mehmed Ağa is the focus of four of the book's paintings based on the real-life assassination of Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa. In one painting it is Mehmed Ağa who visited the dying vizier and who inspected his wounds. It is also indicated that he was the one who took the news of the man's death to the sultan and aided in the assassin's capture.²¹

In art history, the positioning of a person in a painting can indicate to the viewers who was subordinate and who was superior. In these four paintings, Mehmed Ağa is clearly depicted as superior to a senior official.²² Through these works he was able to display his sense of power without insulting the sultan or swaggering too much. However, there were some who chose not to challenge this controversial official while he lived. Upon his death, however, one historian wrote that the 'black calamity is gone from this world'.²³

There were Chief Black Eunuchs before Mehmed Ağa. However, they served in the Bâbüssâde period when the White eunuchs still held

sway. One example is Karabaş Ağa, who was Chief Black Eunuch under Süleyman the Magnificent and who died in 1530. A mosque that he founded, Karabaş Camii, still stands in the Tophane Quarter of Istanbul.²⁴

One has to be cautious with applying terms designating colour to the imperial eunuchs, at least from the 1500s into the early 1600s. One Bâbüssaâde Ağası, it appears, may have been a Black eunuch. The terms 'Bâbüssaâde' and 'Dârriüsaâde' refer to the gates of the palace (a.k.a. the Middle Gate, Gate of Felicity or Ak Ağalar Kapısı and the Harem Gate or Dârriüsaâde Kapısı or Abode of Felicity, respectively), not to the colour of the men who guarded them. When power shifted to the inner gate that the Black eunuchs guarded (the Harem Gate, Dârriüsaâde Kapısı or the Gate of Felicity), it set in motion the rise of the Black eunuchs as a group. However, from 1587 to 1623, there were at least three White eunuchs who became Dârriüsaâde Ağası. Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa (1593–1596), İsmail Ağa (Malatyalı) (1622) and Ak Ağa Süleyman Ağa (1622–1623) were White eunuchs who served, though for relatively short terms. From that time the Black eunuchs had consolidated their power to control the harem and to cement their political power until the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The sultan chose and appointed the Chief Black Eunuch, whose quarters were in close proximity to the imperial apartments. It was there that the eunuch waited for orders from the sovereign. Because the Chief Black Eunuch had access to the sultan at any hour of the day or night, having such immediate quarters was imperative. It was the Chief Black Eunuch who informed the heir to the throne that his predecessor had died. After the sixteenth century, the sultan confined his heirs to the Kafes (Cage, or Seraglio apartment) in the Topkapı Palace, where they remained virtual prisoners until that moment. When the Chief Black Eunuch brought the important news of accession, the erstwhile prisoner became the master of an empire:²⁵

The chief of eunuchs was charged with the affairs to the Imperial Harem; he was responsible for the eunuchs and the male domestics of the Harem. All questions of any importance had to be referred to him. He was a considerable personage who was ensconced, full of dignity, in a room reserved for him in the large building for the staff situated in the courtyard just in front of the Imperial Harem.

He enjoyed the respect and esteem of all [. . .] With the exception of the chief of the eunuchs and the musahibs, all the eunuchs of the Serail and of the Harem were required to stand guard at the gate and in the Guard of the Halvet [eunuch guard of the harem].²⁶

The Chief Black Eunuch was to 'protect the women, provide the necessary odalisques for the harem, oversee the promotion of the women and the eunuchs, act as a witness for the sultan's marriage and birth ceremonies, arrange all ceremonial events, such as circumcision parties, weddings and fêtes, and deliver sentences to harem women accused of crime'.²⁷ He also served as the sultana's 'foreign minister'. One early unique job personally supervised by the Chief Black Eunuch was the elimination of harem women. Many of them were part of palace intrigues or were women who displeased the sultans in some manner. They met their deaths through drowning after their executioners tied them in weighted sacks and dumped them in the Bosphorus. While some of the stories seem exaggerated, it appears that this situation was not as rare as it would seem:

The drowning of one or two women would attract no notice at all, and everything would be carried out with silence and dispatch. The Kızlar Ağâ takes them to the Bostanji-bashi [Head Gardener], under whose direction the hapless females are placed in sacks weighted with stones. The bostanji, to whom the duty of drowning them is committed, board a small rowing-boat to which is attached by a rope to a smaller one in which the women are placed. They then row towards the open water opposite Seraglio Point, and by several dexterous jerks of the rope cause the boat to capsize. A eunuch accompanies the bostanji and reports to the Kızlar Ağâ the fulfilment of his orders.²⁸

Another important duty of the Chief Black Eunuch was his representation of the imperial bride at the wedding ceremony. He also escorted the bridegroom to the woman's door and it was the first time that the groom would enter the bridal chamber. The Chief Black Eunuch's position was so important that on each Wednesday, he held his own divan (council meeting) 'at the little kiosk near the Stable Gate of the Second Court to examine the affairs of the Pious Foundations

[awqaf]'. He also supervised the consequential yearly gift procession (Sürre Alayı) to the sultan of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Median.²⁹

In the Second Court stood the Privy Stable that held 25 to 30 horses. It had several large rooms but today contains an exhibit of imperial coaches and sedan chairs the harem women used. Toward the end of the empire the building served as a dormitory for various Topkapı personnel and, at another time, it served as a hospital for the Black eunuchs.³⁰

The Head Gardener worked for the Outside Service and like the woodcutters, his title does not begin to describe his position and power. Some of his most important duties had nothing to do with gardens but with security, so he and the Chief Black Eunuch sometimes worked closely together. He was not only central in dispatching the harem female slaves, but also anyone else that the sultan wanted to slay:

The Chief Gardener, for example, was in some respects the most powerful official in the Palace, since he had 2,000 men under his control, few of whom in fact did any gardening. His were the watchman, the guards at the gates and in the grounds, his the responsibility for policing the small ports around the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus, his a corps of the Sultan's bodyguard, the porters, groom and bargemen; he supervised the supply to the imperial kitchen of animals and fowl for the table, the removal of refuse from the Palace precincts, and the disciplinary control of the story-tellers, tumblers and other entertainers who enlivened Palace existence. It was under his direction, moreover, that delinquent officials were interrogated and executed.³¹

The Outside Service did not deal with palace affairs exclusively and some units were under the supervision of the Chief White Eunuch or the Chief Black Eunuch. The top officers were among the Ağalar of the Stirrup (Rikabdar Ağa), and some might be generals. By the eighteenth century, the lower ranked members of the Outside Service were placed in one of three categories. One group of four functionaries was dependent on the Chief Black Eunuch as was one of the independent bodies. The woodcutters (Baltacı) were an independent corps and 12 of them were very literate men who accompanied the sultan on his journeys. Under them were 30 others who guarded the standard, who

bought out the throne on special occasions and who carried the effects of the harem when they traveled. They also instructed the lower-ranking Black eunuchs in reading and writing. One served the Chief Black Eunuch as falconer.

Senior members of one division of the woodcutters later commanded by the Chief Black Eunuch helped him manage the pious foundations of the two Holy Cities, and other areas. Senior members were coffee makers to the sultan's mother, the princesses, other slave women of the harem and the Chief Black Eunuch. One served as the robe-keeper to the Chief Black Eunuch and other eunuch officers.³²

The Kızlar Ağası was also a pivotal factor in the palace intrigues. The reign of Selim II (Selim the Sot) began the era nicknamed 'The Sultanate of Women'. Selim's mother, the valide sultan, plus Nur Banu, his principal wife (the first *Kadın*) took power that they used for their own purposes. Following Selim's death (through cracking his skull as he was drunkenly climbing into his marble bath), Nur Banu's son, Murad III, ascended the throne. His mother kept his attention focused on the women of the harem while she maintained her power. She and the queen mother both used the powerful Chief Black Eunuch to help them preserve their authority.³³

The first part of Nur Banu's plan was to eliminate Sokollu Mehmed Paşa, the Grand Vizier (1575–1579), because he was honest. She and her ally, the Kızlar Ağası, devised a plot to have him killed in a way acceptable to the Sultan. One author described the Chief Black Eunuch as 'a particularly venal, mountainous hulk of a eunuch who had amassed a fortune through the sale of offices'. Nur Banu's son, Murad III, was a miser who kept money under his bed until there was no room. He then had a well drilled beneath his bed so he could continue to pour in his money every night. Murad's mother and the Chief Black Eunuch convinced the sultan that Sokollu was selling offices and keeping the money. The plotters found a way to have Sokollu killed at the Topkapı Palace in the presence of the court ministers and his assassin immediately pardoned by the sultan. Another story alleged that the assassin was insane. Nevertheless, it was only after Sokollu Mehmed Paşa's death that Murad discovered that his Grand Vizier was really a poor man.³⁴

The queen mother (valide sultan) also wished to eliminate a rival, First Kadın Safiyya, from the house of Baffo (Safiyya Rabia Sultan).

Safiyya was from a noble Venetian family and made a present to the sultan when she was 13 years old. She was the sultan's favourite and the mother of Murad's only son, Mehmed III. The valide sultan knew she could not have her rival assassinated, so she used her son's other weakness – women. Assisted by the Chief Black Eunuch, she kept him supplied with concubines more beautiful and younger than Sultana Baffo, turning his attention from the affairs of state. Each Friday they presented him with a new virgin, telling him that he had to ensure that his line to the throne was secure. Since Safiyya had only one child, Mehmed, it was in the sultan's interest (so the conspirators told him) that he produce other children. He fathered supposedly 103 to 109 offspring during his reign and according to Penzer, 20 sons and 27 daughters were still living when he died.

The valide sultan's plan did not succeed as well as it could because, although Sultana Baffo no longer shared his bed, she was still his constant companion and, therefore, wielded power. When Nur Banu died in 1583 (and there is some suspicion that Safiyya may have played a role in her demise), Baffo ruled the harem without the interference of a dominating mother-in-law. She was content to allow her husband his nightly indulgences while she controlled his public affairs. Upon the death of Murad III, her son, Mehmed III came to power in 1595. To make sure that he had no rivals, Safiyya, now the valide sultan, arranged for the murders of 18 of his 19 brothers while Mehmed had his father's seven pregnant concubines disposed of as well. She maintained her authority over her son until his death in 1603. She also freed Uthman, her African eunuch, who had probably become a target of Nur Banu.³⁵

Safiyya eliminated her son's potential rivals by insisting that, as the new sultan, Mehmed III, had to invoke the law of fratricide. Mehmed the Conqueror passed it to avoid any disputes concerning succession to the Ottoman throne. In part it read: '[T]he majority of legists have declared that those of my illustrious children and grandchildren who shall ascend the throne shall have the right to execute their brothers, in order to insure the peace of the world; they are to act comfortably.'

Upon his arrival in Istanbul, Mehmed III commanded all of his 19 male siblings to appear before him in the throne room to kiss his hand. All of them arrived (the oldest one being 11) and he told them that they had nothing to fear. Mehmed then ushered them one by one into another

room where a surgeon waited to circumcise them. Also waiting in the same room were the deaf mutes, who strangled all except one with a silken bow cord. The next morning Mehmed inspected the 18 small caskets and then had them buried. He was the last sultan to have his brothers strangled with bowstrings for, from then on, sultans assigned male siblings to the Kafes (Cages).³⁶ Each Kafes contained around ten rooms in which the prince lived, tended to by ten female slaves and three eunuchs, the latter who closely watched him and who were his only contacts to the outside world.

Server Ağa followed Mehmed Ağa (Habeşi) as the second Dârüssaâde Ağası, serving from the illness of his predecessor in 1591 until his dismissal from the palace in 1592. He died during 1592–1593 and did not seem to leave much of a legacy during his 19 months in office. He probably died in Egypt after being exiled there with three of his slaves. Supposedly, Server Ağa either was not a good administrator or, he could not win the politics related to his office, such as attempts from the White eunuchs to regain their former powers.³⁷

Sünbül Ağa served as Dârüssaâde Ağası for only a few months, it seems. Therefore, there is almost no information about him. Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa (1593–1596) was the fourth Dârüssaâde Ağası, following Sünbül Ağa in office. He is an example of why the official titles of earliest eunuchs should reflect the gate and not skin colour or origin. He reigned as Dârüssaâde Ağası during the rise of the Chief Black Eunuchs but Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa was a Caucasian from Bosnia. He worked in Yemen under the supervision of its governor, Mahmud Paşa, before his acceptance to a palace position. After his patron lost his position, Mustafa Ağa went to Istanbul and became one of the Bâbüssäde Ağası. In 1593, he became Dârüssaâde Ağası and, in early 1596, he was retired on a 200-akce pension after becoming ill. He died soon thereafter in Egypt.³⁸

Blindness was supposedly the cause for Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa's voluntary retirement following four years in office. However, it might not be coincidental that Server Ağa's dismissal from office seemed at least partially connected to conflicts between the Black and White eunuchs and a White eunuch succeeded him in office. Also, Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa's retirement was coincidental with the death of Sultan Murad III and the enthronement of Sultan Mehmed III (1595–1603). The new sultan might have wanted to bring in administrators that

he knew he could trust. Further, the next person to hold the office of Chief Black Eunuch had the powerful support of the valide sultan, the sultan's mother.³⁹

Following Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa in the office of Dârüssaâde Ağası was Osman Ağa, obtaining his position under Sultan Mehmed III (1596–1603) in 1596. He was an experienced functionary and *basâğası*, the head ağa in the palace of the sultan's mother, but was executed in 1603. Osman Ağa also participated in the suppression of the Celali Rebellion of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Anatolia. The Sipahi, province administrators and tax collectors, might have had Osman killed because they felt that he did not perform well enough during the Celali Rebellion.⁴⁰

Osman Ağa became heavily involved in palace politics and was the first Chief Black Eunuch to have been executed. Along with Chief White Eunuch Gazanfer Ağa, the cavalry of the Porte accused them as orchestrating 'the deposition of the grand vizier Sinan Paşa and for misinforming the sultan about the rebels in Anatolia'. The soldiers saw them as causing the disorder and demanded their execution. Osman Ağa was also a favourite of Valide Sultan Safiyya, who was also implicated in the affair. She attempted to bribe the soldiers, who also attempted to dislodge her from the palace. When her bribery attempt failed, the soldiers called for the heads of her favourites, who were the Chief White Eunuch, the Chief Gardener and the Chief Black Eunuch. Although the sultan liked the men, political expediency deemed that he comply with the demands for their execution.⁴¹

Osman Ağa was also involved in the early construction of the famous Yeni Camii, located in Eminönü. Officially named the New Mosque of the Valide Sultan, it was part of a complex (*küllîye*) that included a hospital, fountains, mausoleum, school, public bath, market and more. The very popular market that used to financially support the complex is the Egyptian Market, also known as the Spice Bazaar.

Valide Sultan Safiyya, the mother of Sultan Mehmed III, commissioned the Camii in 1597. Neither her ruling son nor her deceased husband (Murad III) seemed to have been interested in leaving a legacy of buildings to commemorate their reigns, so Safiyya decided to build a monument. Although her initial efforts were stalled for 57 years, the Camii was finally completed in 1665. The project's initial overseer was Kapıcı Kara Mehmed Ağa, who had the authority to pay

compensation to the owners of the confiscated property. He was the chief steward (*kethüda*) of the Chief Black Eunuch, Osman Ağa.⁴²

Osman Ağa was followed in office by İbrahim Ağa, who only held the position of Chief Black Eunuch for a relatively short time. There were several uprisings in Istanbul and elite cavalry units blamed İbrahim for underestimating the strength of the rebels and demanded that Sultan Mehmed III execute him. Whether he was responsible or merely a scapegoat, İbrahim Ağa was killed on 6 January 1603.⁴³

The next Chief Black Eunuch was Abdürrezzâk Ağa, who also grew up in the palace. After Abdürrezzâk Ağa rose to become Chief Black Eunuch in 1603–1604, he engineered the death of the sultan's oldest son, 21-year-old Prince Mahmud. The power the eunuch accumulated from his duties in the Topkapı Sarayı enabled him to sway the sultan to believe that the particular son was plotting against him. Sultan Mehmed believed the Chief Black Eunuch and, on 7 June 1603, he had his son and his son's mother executed. Perhaps Handan, one of Sultan Mehmed's concubines, devised the plot because she wanted her son, Ahmed, to be the heir apparent. Indeed, when Sultan Mehmed died in December 1603, Ahmed I (1603–1617) ascended to the throne, becoming the first sultan not to have his brothers executed at that time.⁴⁴

Abdürrezzâk Ağa continued in his position under Sultan Ahmed I (1603–1617) until the reign of Reyhan (Sweet Basil) Ağa in 1604–1605. There is some suspicion that Abdürrezzâk Ağa was killed in late 1604, perhaps over his internecine activities in the palace. Reyhan grew up in the palace but resigned his position as Dârüssâde Ağa in December 1605 to become Bâbüssâde Ağa, Chief Ağa of the Gate of the Third Courtyard. Following his retirement, he died in 1615. At this point, it is not clear if he was White or Black.⁴⁵

The third Chief Black Eunuch under Ahmed I was Mustafa Ağa (Haçı), promoted to his position in December 1605. He managed to stay in power until 1620 when he received his dismissal, having also served during the short reign of Sultan Mustafa I and about two years under Sultan Osman I. Mustafa Ağa seemed to have gained some influence in Athens as well, according to a document dated 1617 from the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Athenians believed that they were receiving less than hospitable treatment from the Turkish governor and sent delegations to Constantinople around 1610. Fortunately for them,

Sultan Ahmed I had a favourite wife named Basilike, who was also Athenian. After being asked to request a favour from the ruler, she asked that her native city be transferred to the supervision of the Chief Black Eunuch. Ahmed granted her request and the Athenians began to benefit from that relationship. By the mid-1840s, that relationship would become even stronger.⁴⁶

Süleyman Ağa, a protégée of Haçî Mustafa Ağa, became Chief Black eunuch in March 1620. The headstrong administrator who died in 1622 lies buried near the Süleyman Ağa mescit (small mosque).⁴⁷ In 1623, following the short reigns of Dârüssaâde Ağalar Süleyman Ağa, İsmail Ağa (Malatyalı) and Ak Ağa Süleyman Ağa, Haçî Mustafa Ağa returned to power for the second time, serving his fourth sultan, Murad IV. Deemed indispensable, he was able to sponsor the careers of one Grand Vizier and three viziers. Although there is no direct evidence at the time, 'most agreed that the chief black eunuch Mustafa Ağa was the architect of the deposition of Mustafa I and the enthronement of Osman II'.⁴⁸

Again, the power of the Chief Black Eunuch is evident. Following his enthronement, Osman II had two very close advisors, Chief Black Eunuch Mustafa Ağa and mentor Omer Efendi, appointed to that position in 1609 after serving as the sultan's private instructor.⁴⁹ Osman appointed Ali Paşa, former Grand Admiral of the navy, to Grand Vizier. Ali was a close ally of Mustafa Ağa. It was the opinion of Philippe Harlay de comte de Césy, the resident ambassador of France, that Mustafa was behind that appointment.⁵⁰ After Ali Paşa's death in March 1621, Osman appointed Hüseyin Paşa to the post of Grand Vizier. Hüseyin had been chief gardener under the sponsorship of Mustafa Ağa, rose to be general of the janissaries and later, was appointed governor-general of Rumelia. Out of the pool of viziers, Hüseyin ranked the lowest in seniority.⁵¹

İsmail Ağa (Malatyalı) was a White eunuch who seemed to have risen to the position of *bas ağası*, chief ağa of the *valide* sultan. It appears, then, that he was the last white *bas ağası*. İsmail Ağa was involved in charitable efforts but in 1622, was in exile. That would be the last time that White eunuchs would have any influence in the harem. Now, the Black eunuchs would hand the offices of the harem to their own and therefore, further centralize their powers.⁵²

About a year after returning to office, Haçî Mustafa Ağa died in 1624. He was interred near a window at the Mosque and Türbe of Eyüp Ensari,

a designated Companion of the Prophet Mohammed. He was a highly tyrannical person who was also very bright. Some working under him became viziers. There is an extant fountain constructed in his name opposite the Kirmızı Mosque in the village of Hasköy, near the Ayvansaray-Hasköy Bridge opposite Eyüp.⁵³

The Chief Black Eunuch's power was conspicuously evident during the reign of Ahmed I. Ahmed chose less than adequate advisors and the fact that his harem women sometimes influenced his decisions did not help the situation. Many of the seraglio's inhabitants exerted power over the sultan, including the Kızlar Ağası, whose court rivaled the opulence of the sultan. One Italian contemporary remarked, 'One knows not in truth who is the sovereign.'⁵⁴

Some observed the power of the Chief Black Eunuch upon the enthronement of Mustafa I (1617–1618 and 1622–1623). After the death of Sultan Ahmed I at age 27, his successor should have been Prince Osman. For 14 generations, the throne had passed from father to eldest son. However, Osman was only 13 and some members of the imperial council believed he was too young to rule. Since there was an older prince available, Ahmed's brother Mustafa, they decided to enthrone him instead. İbrahim Peçevi observed that event and recorded it. He wrote, 'the change in the law of succession was engineered by Chief Black Eunuch Mustafa Ağa, to whose management all affairs of state had been committed during the reign of Ahmed Kahn'.

Once installed as sultan, many became aware that Mustafa I suffered from mental and physical illnesses. The valide sultan (mother of the reigning sultan) took over the reins of government when her son was committed to the care of doctors. The ulema (Islamic religious hierarchy) began to pressure the valide sultan to dismiss Mustafa Ağa, whom they believed was attempting to depose Mustafa I. Mustafa Naima, author of *Annals of the Turkish Empire from 1591 to 1659*, wrote that Mustafa Ağa tricked the valide sultan through weeping and lying, so she allowed him to remain Chief Black Eunuch. Mustafa Ağa then persuaded the ulema to issue a fatwa, a religious ruling, stating that Sultan Mustafa's mental incapacity made him unfit to rule. Subsequently, Mustafa I was deposed on 26 February 1618, ending his first reign, which had lasted only 96 days.⁵⁵ He was then confined to a special apartment (Kafes or, Cage) in the inner palace of the Topkapı

Sarayı. On the same day he was deposed Osman II, age 13 years and four months, ascended to the throne.⁵⁶

One has to wonder if the Chief Black Eunuch knew that Mustafa I might have been mentally deficient. While imprisoned in Seraglio and before ascending to the throne, Mustafa would throw gold coins instead of breadcrumbs to the fish swimming in the Bosphorus. The Kızlar Ağası persuaded Mustafa to halt his actions by suggesting that he save the gold for gifts to the Janissaries when he would ascend the throne. At that point in time, it seemed virtually impossible that Mustafa had any chance of being sultan.⁵⁷

Sultan Osman II (1618–1622) decided that he wanted to reduce the numbers of Janissaries, who then revolted against the 16-year-old. He hid in the palace and, during the search, Janissaries killed the Chief Black Eunuch Süleyman Ağa, either because he would not or could not tell them Osman's location. Meanwhile, they did locate a starving Mustafa in a cubicle with two African women. After locating Osman, his captors took him to the Yedikule prison. Seventeenth-century traveller and chronicler Evliya Çelebi (Evliyâ Efendî) recounted the event in his *Book of Travels* or, *Seyahatnâme*:

They carried him in a cart to Yedikule where he was barbarously treated and at last most cruelly put to death by Pehlivan (the Wrestler). Whilst his body was exposed upon a mat, Kafir Ağa cut off his right ear and a Janissary one of his fingers for the sake of a ring.⁵⁸

Grand Vizier Kara Davut Paşa (1622) helped to strangle Osman on 22 May 1622. The young sultan fought bravely and strongly until Davit clamped down on his testicles and squeezed. Subsequently, they could tighten the cord around his neck.⁵⁹ In the room where Osman died is a trapdoor with a passage (according to the current caretaker) that leads to the Marmara Sea, where Osman's head supposedly plunged. The formidable Janissaries dethroned or murdered six sultans and remained powerful until the reign of Mahmud II (1803–1839), who eliminated them after 16 years of calculated planning.

Sultan Mustafa I re-ascended the throne in 1622 for a second short reign. He ordered the Chief White Eunuch to strangle his younger brothers but the new Kızlar Ağası was one step ahead of the sultan.

He knew that if anyone carried out Mustafa's command, the Osman line of the sultanate would end. He also knew that Mustafa 'had such a passionate hatred of women that he could never sire a son'. The Kızlar Ağası sent pages to rescue the prince while other pages killed the Chief White Eunuch, thus saving the royal line.⁶⁰

Murad IV (1623–1640) was 14 years old when he ascended to the throne. He was a drunkard who terrorized the city by running through the streets at night and killing anyone he met with his sword. During the day, he would disguise himself, roaming the city and murdering anyone at will. Before his death in 1640, he decided that he would kill his brother İbrahim, which would have ended the Osmanlı dynasty, for he had no sons.

Murad IV had three Chief Black Eunuchs, the first being Mustafa Ağa (Hacı) who attained his office in 1623. This was the second time Mustafa Ağa held that rank, having served from December 1605 until his dismissal in 1620. During that first phase, he ministered to sultans Ahmed I (1603–1617), Mustafa I (1617–1618) and Osman II (1618–1622). Coincidentally, Sultan Mustafa I was dethroned but would rule again in 1622–1623. Mustafa Ağa died in 1624 and was interred near the window of Eyüp Ensari's türbe at the Eyüp Sultan Camii. Mustafa Ağa was tyrannical but at the same time, a bright person as evidenced by the fact that some of his apprentices became viziers. At least one fountain constructed around Fatih Camii complex honours his name.⁶¹

İdris Ağa succeeded Mustafa Ağa (Hacı) in office with his appointment in 1623–1624 and held office almost to the end of the reign of Sultan Murad IV. He worked his way up from Palace Chief (head male servant) and held office for almost 17 years. Supposedly, some attributed his longevity because he did not become involved in intrigues but just 'did his job'. He died in February 1640.⁶²

Saved by the intervention of his mother, Mahpeyker Kösem Valide Sultan, Sultan İbrahim (1640–1648) claimed the throne at age 24. Like his brother, he suffered from mental illness and his mother, again valide sultan, held power. At first, many feared İbrahim was impotent. Following the lead of the mother, when a confidante named Pezevenk (the Pimp) and the sultan's tutor plied İbrahim with women, aphrodisiacs and pornographic materials, he began to exhibit interest in his concubines. He engaged in excessive sensual pleasure, resulting in the birth of a son, the future sultan Mehmed IV (1648–1687), in

January 1642. The concubine Hadice Turhan (Turhan Hadice Valide Sultan) was the mother. The following account provides an insight to İbrahim's madness and the status of Chief Black Eunuch Sünbül Ağa (Hoca), who became Chief Black Eunuch in 1640–1641. Sultan İbrahim had ten Chief Black Eunuchs during his reign:

After Hadice Turhan presented İbrahim with an heir, the chief black eunuch Sünbül (Hyacinth) Ağa arranged for one of his own female slaves to serve as wet-nurse to the prince. Sünbül Ağa had purchased this girl from a Persian slave dealer in the belief that she was a virgin, but when she turned out to be pregnant he sent her to the house of his steward, where she gave birth to a son. Sünbül was so taken with the boy that he adopted him, and arranged for him to be raised in the imperial harem when the slave girl became Prince Mehmed's wet nurse. İbrahim also took a deep affection for the boy, who was much better looking than his own son, and took great delight in playing with him, while he ignored Prince Mehmed. This aroused the jealousy of Hadice Turhan, who one day vented her fury on the nurse and her son. İbrahim was so enraged by her behaviour that he took Mehmed out of Hadice Turhan's arms and threw him into a cistern, where the child would have been drowned had the harem servants not gone to the rescue. As it was Mehmed suffered a cut to his head, resulting in a scar he bore for the rest of his days.⁶³

Near the end of Sünbül Ağa's term in office, Abdülkadir Ağa, the Eski Saray Ağası (the Old Palace chief responsible for maintaining order in the sultan's private residence and who reported to the Chief White Eunuch) replaced him for about a month in April 1644. Mehmed II (the Conqueror), who held power from 1451 to 1481, was the first sultan to use the Eski Saray as a residence following his conquering of the city. Meanwhile, Abdülkadir Ağa received a transfer order back to the Old Palace as ağası once more, and died while serving in that position. Sünbül Ağa, it seems, got back his title for a few months.⁶⁴

Sünbül Ağa was terrified of İbrahim's outrageous behaviour and asked to be retired to Egypt, which occurred in 1644. When İbrahim granted his request, Sünbül took the slave girl and her son to first sail from

Istanbul to Mecca for a pilgrimage. Strong winds blew the three ships loaded with goods and treasures to Rhodes. Maltese pirates boarded the ship, killing Sümbül Ağa and captured the slave girl and her son. They took them and the booty to Crete, a Mediterranean island between Greece and North Africa that the Venetians controlled. The wealth contained in the ships led the pirates to believe that the boy was the son of Sultan İbrahim and they planned to ransom him. Further, the presence of the Chief Black Eunuch aboard one of the ships confirmed their suspicions. After finding out he was not the son of the sultan, they raised him a Christian and eventually he became a friar known as 'Padre Ottoman'. Even so, many still believed him to be the heir to the Ottoman throne.

Another report declared that Sümbül Ağa, after receiving the Royal Consent to leave, took three ships plus seven smaller vessels of his personal treasures. He fought the pirates valiantly, though he was 'educated to the softness of the Seraglio, and in the conversation of the Female Court [...]'. The same person opined 'those persons do not always lose their courage when they lose their Virile Parts'.⁶⁵

The Kızlar Ağası's wealth that the Christians seized was immense. It is evident from its description why the pirates would have thought that the boy could have been the sultan's son. Besides gold, silver and jewels, which were personal treasures that Sümbül Ağa had amassed during his service with three sultans, they also captured 350 slaves plus 30 women. Some of the women were young and virgins, 'so that there was not a Christian seaman who did not benefit himself'.⁶⁶

İbrahim was livid over Sümbül Ağa's death and decided to enact revenge. His behaviour demonstrated both his madness and perhaps, his regard for his former Chief Black Eunuch. Besides this action, which lasted 20 years, he spent almost all of the remainder of his time in the harem devoted to lust:

When news of Sümbül Ağa's murder reached İbrahim he was furious, and his first thought was to mount an attack against Malta. But his advisors persuaded him that Malta was impregnable, and so he decided to invade Crete, thus seeking revenge on the Venetians for having allowed the pirates to take refuge there. Thus İbrahim launched an expedition against Crete

in the spring of 1645, masking it as an attack on Malta to give the Ottoman forces the advantage of surprise.⁶⁷

İbrahim initiated the second attack on Crete by an Ottoman sultan following the campaign of Süleyman I against the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, secluded in Malta. İbrahim's daughter, Mihrimah, plus the Seraglio, urged the sultan to attack the infidels. The essential reason was that the Knights had captured a large vessel carrying a valuable cargo of goods that belonged to the Kızlar Ağası and in which principal harem women owned shares.⁶⁸

It was under Sultan İbrahim that the drowning of women in the seraglio came to the public's attention. Sechir Para (Şekerpare), nicknamed 'Sweet Lump of Sugar', was one of his sultanas as well as his procurer of women for his sexual pleasure. 'Sugar' told him that one of his concubines was caught 'in a compromising position' with a man. There was no proof that such an incident took place, but İbrahim did not need proof. İbrahim assigned the Kızlar Ağası to identify the culprit. When he could not find the name of a guilty party, the Chief Black Eunuch began to torture some of the concubines. When that revealed no names, İbrahim had the Kızlar Ağası assist in killing all of the 280 concubines – aside from Sugar.

The concubines were murdered in groups, carried in weighted sacks to one of the gates and loaded on a boat. A larger boat that held the eunuchs pulled the smaller boat with the bodies to the middle of the Bosphorus and toppled the sacks into the water. One of the victims did not drown and managed to free herself from a sack. A boat sailing to France rescued her and she narrated her story from there.

One of Istanbul's 300 divers was lowered into the Bosphorus and looked for bodies. He told people that he saw 'a great number of bowing sacks, each containing the body of a dead woman standing upright on the weighted end and swaying to-and-fro with the current'. This was another example of the close relationship between the sultan and the Kızlar Ağası whom the ruler trusted to complete this secretive and murderously sensitive mission.⁶⁹

Following the death of Sünbül Ağa, Ali Ağa (Taşyatır) became Chief Black Eunuch. He was Palace Ağası until sent to Egypt. In 1644, Sultan İbrahim appointed him to the post of Kızlar Ağası, which he held until 1645, when Sultan İbrahim dismissed him and sent him to Egypt again.

Almost ten years following his exile, Sultan Mehmed IV (1648–1687) asked Ali Ağa to return to Istanbul to become his *musahib*, or the sultan's gentleman-in-waiting. Part of his job included carrying messages from the sultan to harem's mistress.⁷⁰ Through whatever means, Ali Ağa managed to capture the attention of the new sultan and receive a distinguished appointment. He died thereafter.

İbrahim Ağa (Celâlî) followed Ali Ağa into office, becoming Kızlar Ağası in early 1645. His nickname indicates that he was a rebellious or angry person. He would remain in his position until mid-1647 when Sultan İbrahim exiled him to Egypt. İbrahim Ağa returned to power in early 1648 after the short reigns of four other Chief Black Eunuchs, holding office until October 1649.⁷¹

The year 1645, also noted for Sultan İbrahim's war with Venice over Crete, became the year when the power of the Kızlar Ağası increased dramatically, extending to Athens. Athens had a population between 8,000 and 10,000 persons, about 25 per cent of whom were Turks. Power over the then fading city, which had surrendered to the Turks in 1458, was transferred to the Chief Black Eunuch, who received a tribute of 30,000 crowns. His annually appointed administrator received another 5,000 to 6,000 crowns.⁷² One visitor to Athens, British ambassador to the Porte Lord Winchelsea, reported 'he had seen few towns in the Ottoman Empire that had preserved themselves as well, or that enjoyed greater privileges'. When Mustafa Ağa oversaw Athens around 1610, a governor and other Turkish officials reported to him. Thirty-some years later the current Kızlar Ağası supervisor would have been Ali Ağa (Taşyadır), in power from September 1644 to March 1645 or İbrahim Ağa (Celâlî), who was Kızlar Ağa from March 1645 to May 1647:

The Athenians appealed to the protection of the Kızlar Ağa or Chief Black Eunuchs whenever they experienced any difficulty or abuse from the local Turks. They had divided the town into eight districts, and for each of these, one of the most substantial and respected men was chosen to settle all problems in a friendly manner between Christians. Thus they effectively governed themselves in matters that concerned only themselves.⁷³

Beşir Ağa was Chief Black Eunuch when James Caulfeild (Lord Charlemont) made his famous trip to Greece and Turkey in 1749.

The Irish statesman, noted for his hatred of Beşir Ağa, still managed to provide some insights in the midst of his histrionics and laments for 'the good old days'. The Chief Black Eunuchs controlled more than just the city of Athens:

This venerable city, together with the whole region of Attica and the adjacent countries of Eleusis and Megara, have been, as I have elsewhere mentioned, granted by the Grand Signor to his Kızlar Ağa, as an appendage for the maintenance of his household, and were, when I was there, governed by a slave of the Treasurer, or first slave of this emasculate monster.⁷⁴

The story of Athens and the Kızlar Ağası began in 1574 under Mehmed Ağa and lasted until 1760 when Musahib Beşir Ağa was Chief Black Eunuch. One example of the relative fairness of the Kızlar Ağası is his response to events occurring in 1671, the year that both Abbas Ağa and Yusuf Ağa were Chief Black Eunuchs. Life was difficult for the non-Muslim Athenians, who had to pay a 'head tax' to keep their heads. Yusuf Ağa's deputy began insisting on increased taxes to the extent that a 'deputation of clergy and notables went to Constantinople to protest'. It appeared that there was no relief, so they personally appealed to Yusuf Ağa again in 1675. This time the Kızlar Ağası 'acknowledged the justice of the complaints' and fired his administrator, the volvode, and the garrison commander, the disdar ağa. He also ordered both of them 'to surrender what they had unlawfully levied and fined them heavily'.

Wealthy Athenian Michael Limbonas led the second delegation to Constantinople. Accompanying him were his father-in-law John Benizelos and Nicolas Cheilas, both collaborators with the Turks of Athens who seemed to condone the higher taxes on their Greek neighbours. Upon return to Athens, both of the collaborators had to seek refuge from the Greek community because of their duplicity. Although Limbonas had successfully presented his case, it was another matter to have the Kızlar Ağası's orders carried out. Because of the stalling of the Turks, Limbonas traveled again to Istanbul to meet with Yusuf Ağa 'and persuaded him to send his representative to carry out his commands'. In retaliation, the Turks murdered Limbonas in 1678, placing Yusuf Ağa in the middle of the situation once again when the Athenians petitioned him to punish the murderers. Yusuf Ağa 'had them arrested and taken to

Constantinople, where they were either imprisoned for life or exiled'. The Ottomans held Athens until 1833.⁷⁵

Meanwhile İshak Ağa, raised in the palace, was appointed Kızlar Ağası in 1647, following İbrahim Ağa's first term in office. It took only three months for his dismissal and exile to Egypt. A few days after his arrival, İshak received word that he was to be brought back to Istanbul but only three or four days after that news, he received word of his dismissal for the second time. He later died in Egypt.⁷⁶ Between those two appointments, Musahib Mehmed Ağa became Chief Black Eunuch in 1647. He also grew up in the palace and was the sultan's gentleman-in-waiting, but his tenure lasted only a month before he died, apparently killed on orders of the sultan. Before he became Kızlar Ağası, Mehmed Ağa constructed a school and fountain in the village of Salıpazarı, located between Beşiktaş and the Dolmabahçe Palace.⁷⁷

Sometimes called Maksûd, Mes'ud Ağa also became Chief Black Eunuch in 1647 following a stint as gentleman-in-waiting. He quit in 1648 and died in 1650. Before attaining that position, he built a public fountain in Sarıyer, a fishing village.⁷⁸ Then, the sultan called İbrahim Ağa back to Istanbul in 1648 to begin his second term as Kızlar Ağası. The following year, in October 1649, İbrahim Ağa received a second operation related to the one that emasculated him. He bled a lot and was sent back to Egypt to recover, whereupon Mehmed Ağa (Kız) rose to the position of Kızlar Ağası, elevated from his position as chief of the old palace. In 1651, it appears that Sultan Mehmed IV, the son who succeeded Sultan İbrahim, had İbrahim Ağa killed in Egypt. It looks as if İbrahim Ağa had opposed Sultan İbrahim and, although the latter was already dead, İbrahim Ağa had to pay for his indiscretions.⁷⁹

Mehmed Ağa (Kız) served as Ağa of the Old Palace (Eski Saray) before replacing İbrahim Ağa in October 1649. He was exiled to Egypt in October 1650, allowing Süleyman Ağa (Lala/Uzun) to succeed him in office. Mehmed Ağa (Kız) died in Egypt during 1676.⁸⁰ Süleyman Ağa was the head ağa in the palace of Sultan Mehmed IV's mother until his appointment as Chief Black Eunuch in August 1649. He served until his dismissal in July 1652 and then exiled to Egypt. In 1676, he returned to Istanbul following a stint on the Greek island of Limn, which Greece ceded to the Ottoman Empire in 1479. Described as smart and dignified, Süleyman Ağa (Lala/Uzun) seems to have continued to serve Sultan

Mehmed IV in some capacity for 15 years after his removal from office. He died some time after 1676.⁸¹

On the night of 2–3 September 1651, a few years after İbrahim's assault on Crete, the new Kızlar Ağası would dispatch the Old Queen, mother of Murad IV, Osman II and İbrahim. Süleyman Ağa (Lala/Uzun) handled the strangling of Valide Sultan Mahpeyker Kösem at the Topkapı Sarayı's Birdcage Gate. The young Sultan Mehmed IV (1648–1687), grandson of Kösem, signed the decree the Grand Vizier devised because his grandmother attempted to depose him through supporting an August uprising and placing his younger brother, future sultan Süleyman II, on the throne. She was accused of planning to poison Mehmed. The Old Queen's captors unceremoniously stripped the old woman naked and dragged her by her feet to her place of execution. The usual method of execution for members of the Ottoman dynasty was strangulation with a greased noose. In this case, however, Süleyman Ağa strangled the woman by twisting her braids around her neck.⁸²

The dispatching of the Old Queen, wife of deceased Sultan Ahmed I, was the result of a tremendous amount of palace intrigue. It seemed that the grandmother (Kösem) engineered the death of her husband as well as her son, Sultan İbrahim. The mother of Mehmed IV (the latter who ascended to the throne at age six), feared that the Kösem might have her grandson killed as well. As the plotters were making their move, the vizier, who had pretended to go along with the conspirators, was on his way to the sultan's apartments to sound the alarm, when he fortunately met the Kızlar Ağası. Tall Süleyman Ağa (Lala) was making his rounds near the queen's lodgings, amazed that the vizier was there at such a late hour. After some discussion, Süleyman reported that the Old Queen was usually in bed at that time but, on that night, was up entertaining with 'her Eunuchs, and Favourites, with Musick, Singing, and other unusual delights'.

After discussions the vizier, Süleyman and the sultan's eunuchs went to the Old Queen's quarters and attempted to force their way in. A report from 1675 said that at first the Old Queen's entourage repulsed them:

[...] but *Süleyman Ağa* being a stout man drew his Dagger and struck the chief Chamberlain *Bash Kapa Oglar* on the face, upon which the other Eunuchs who accompanied *Süleyman* entered

furiously with their Daggers, at which the Eunuchs of the Queen flying, she remained alone in the Chamber, where she was committed to the Custody of the Kings Eunuchs. The fugitive Eunuchs would immediately have escaped out of the *Seraglio*, but the Gates were first shut by order of *Süleyman Ağa*, so that they with all other favourites of the said Queen were taken and secured in safe hands.⁸³

Süleyman Ağa and his accomplices moved so silently and rapidly that most of the palace remained asleep. They also used a shared sign language that assured them that no one could hear voices. The eunuchs were so proficient in sign language that they would practise by telling stories. Meanwhile they called out their forces to secure the palace against any attackers. The men went to Turhan Hadice Valide Sultan's quarters and awakened her, informing her of the conspiracy to depose the child sultan:

[She] was scarce informed of the business before she became so affrighted, that she could not contain her self within the bounds of moderation or silence, but with a great cry ran to take her Son as one distracted, and catching him up in her arms, cried out, O Son, you and I are dead; the Grand Signior likewise as a child bewailed himself, and falling at the feet of *Süleyman Ağa*, said Lala, Lala Kurtar-beni; which is Tutor, Tutor, save me: He not without tears took his Lord into his arms, and with the vizier encouraged the Child and his Mother, protesting that they would rather die, than live to behold so horrid a ruine.⁸⁴

A procession from the valide sultan's quarters along with Süleyman Ağa's group marched to the throne room and placed the boy sultan on the throne. The guards awakened their sleeping comrades along with 40 of their officers. The officers asked what they could do to show their loyalty and Tall Süleyman Ağa responded:

Hereat Süleyman Ağa said, He that eats the Kings bread, should apply himself to the Kings service; we suffered the Traitors to destroy Sultan İbrahim, and now they would also take this out of our hands; To you it belongs, who are His Majesties Principal

Servitors, to afford him your utmost assistance. Eiginsi Mustapha Passa, Sword-bearer to the Grand Signior, and chief of the Presence Chamber, a man of a Lions heart and undaunted resolution, understood something formerly of the bad inclinations of the Old Queen toward the King, readily replied, Great Master be not troubled, to morow you shall see (God willing) the Heads of your Enemies at your feet.⁸⁵

By morning, branches of the military, the navy, Black and White eunuch guards, chamber pages, falconers, and anyone else descended on the palace in support of the sultan. The Janissaries were slow to respond because they might have supported the Queen Mother's plans. After all, they helped the Old Queen dispatch her son İbrahim. When they saw the thousands who had arrived to support Mehmed IV, they fell in line. Meanwhile the young sultan signed the order to have his grandmother strangled, but not cut with a sword or bruised.

Süleyman Ağa led a contingent to the Old Queen's apartments but was met by her Black eunuchs guarding the door. Her eunuchs would only allow 20 men to enter the quarters when a woman with a pistol stopped them, identifying herself as the Old Queen. She drew a pistol and pulled the trigger but the gun misfired. Süleyman Ağa informed the group that she was not the Old Queen and to keep searching. Since only the eunuchs had contact with the women, probably no one else in the group could identify the quarry. The agents searched the Old Queen's dark chambers but found no one. They brought in torches and still failed to locate her, threatening to kill Süleyman Ağa for allowing her to escape. The Kızlar Ağası told the men to search carefully and they found the Old Queen hiding under a pile of clothes in a corner. Although she attempted to bribe the men with money and jewels to save her life, they strangled her with a borrowed cord because no one had a bowstring. Although she was over 80 years old, it took four young men to end her life. She had no teeth but gummed down on the thumb of one of her executioners so hard that he had to strike her in the head with a weapon to force her to release him.⁸⁶ The Kızlar Ağası was pivotal in aborting the deposing of the sultan and meting out the punishment and eliminating the conspirators.

The death of the Old Queen had repercussions that reached far beyond the palace walls. Süleyman Ağa played a crucial role in ending

the period known as 'The Sultanate of the Ağas (1648–1651)'. Beginning with the year the young Mehmed IV ascended to the throne and ending with the death of Kösem, some ağalar, military leaders, began to fight over power. One main group supported the mother of Mehmed III while a second powerful group supported the young sultan's grandmother, who dominated the harem and the state spanning four sultans. The division even affected the military, seeing some units opposing others. The ağalar informally became the state cabinet, appointing and firing officials almost at will. The economy was in shambles, the currency devalued and advance taxes had to be paid two years ahead. There was starvation and the empire seemed on the verge of collapse. Inspired by his mother, the young sultan executed principal ağa leaders of the opposition and exiled less important ones. That ended 'The Sultanate of the Ağas'.

The sultan's mother, Turhan Hatice Valide Sultan, and her allies, now dominated the government, supported by the Chief Black Eunuch, Süleyman Ağa. There was still a lot of turmoil in the economy plus a blockade prevented the importation of much-needed grains. Turhan Hatice Valide Sultan and Süleyman Ağa replaced a weak Grand Vizier with a stronger one, knowing that their powers might diminish. The new minister of state clearly demonstrated that he would not negotiate with those who disagreed with him through an ominous illustration. Tarhoncu Ahmed Paşa (1652–1653) rounded up several hundred prisoners and had them publicly beheaded at selected sites. He audited the accounts of the Imperial Treasury, including accounts of the palace, and recouped stolen monies, including sums from Turhan Sultan herself. For the first time, the Grand Vizier presented an imperial budget before the beginning of the financial year.⁸⁷

Following the short nine-month appointment of Tarhoncu Ahmed Paşa, executed because of rumors that he wanted to depose Mehmed IV, power returned to Turhan Hatice Valide Sultan and Süleyman Ağa. Süleyman Ağa (Lala/Uzun) remained in power until July 1652 when he was retired to Egypt. He returned to Istanbul from Egypt in 1676, and then was sent to Limni, dying there the same year. Süleyman Ağa (Lala/Uzun) seemed to have been a very intelligent and virtuous person who also knew how to survive the potentially dangerous political machinations of the palace.⁸⁸ His retirement opened the way for Behrâm Ağa, formerly chief ağa of the Old Palace, to rise to power in

July 1652. Behrâm Ağa was able to attain authority but in March 1656, he was killed on orders. He seemed to have been tyrannical but at the same time, to have been an honourable person.⁸⁹

From 1653 to 1656, there was a series of corrupt viziers who caused a great deal of political chaos. The young sultan's sister aligned herself with Süleyman Ağa in order to have her husband, Ibşir Mustafa, appointed Grand Vizier (1654–1655). Ibşir Mustafa Paşa's intrigues ended when a rival got the Janissaries to behead him and then secured for himself the position of Grand Vizier. However, Süleyman Ağa did not get to exercise his newly gained powers for very long and was not able to attempt to halt the increasingly acrimonious situation.⁹⁰ In 1651, he was exiled to Lemnos, a Greek island between Mount Athos and the Turkish coast. He died in 1676 during the reign of Chief Black Eunuch Yusuf Ağa.

Annually on the Muslim three-day holiday of Şeker Bayramı (Sugar Festival) that ended the month of Ramadan, the sultans would go to the Great Hall to listen to the pages discuss subjects that they learned over the previous year. Mehmed IV was just over age six when he became sultan, the youngest ever. He decided that he would imitate his ancestors and set off for the hall. His mother believed him to be too young to engage in the ceremony and had the Chief Black Eunuch forcefully return him home.⁹¹

The Chief Black Eunuch was an important personage after the birth of a child in the palace. He presented the imperial infant's cradle to the sultan for inspection and approval. One was usually bedecked in gold and jewels:

When a child was born to one of the sultan's women it was the custom to present it with three cradles; one, the least elaborate, made by the mint and on hand for the birth, and two others, vying in magnificence, gifts of the valide sultan and the Grand Vizier. Such a cradle was brought to the palace in procession, the *beşik alayı* or cradle procession, which entered the Imperial Gate and passed through the First and Second Courts. At the Carriage Gate the cradle went to the chief black eunuch. He took it to the sultan to be admired and then gave it to the stewardess of the harem who carried it to the mother's room. There the most important women of the court had gathered for the occasion, and they rose to their

feet to greet it. While the midwife offered a prayer, the baby was placed in the cradle.⁹²

It was during March 1656 that Dilâver Ağa, formerly Ağa of the Old Palace, rose to become Kızlar Ağası. The fifth Kızlar Ağa to serve Mehmed IV, he remained in power until January 1658, after which he was exiled to Egypt, where he died.⁹³ Mehmed Ağa (Solak) followed him to office, serving from January 1658 until June 1663. Nicknamed 'the left-handed', he was raised in the palace and became a gentleman-in-waiting. In 1655–1656, he received a promotion to Imperial Treasurer and, in January 1658, became Kızlar Ağası. He received his dismissal in June 1663 and was posted to Egypt, where he died.⁹⁴ Muslî Ağa held the post next. He was raised in the palace and became the chief gatekeeper of the women. In June 1663, the sultan appointed him to his new post. He turned out to be very important to Mehmed IV and everyone seemed to like him, including the upper bureaucrats. He held his post until he died in 1667–1668.

After serving as Chief Ağa for the Vâlide Sultan, Abbas Ağa replaced Muslî Ağa as Kızlar Ağa in 1667–1668. He was retired to Egypt in July 1671, where he later died. He had the (Mufti) Molla Fenari mosque (Bursa) and the Beşiktaş mosques built and, further, he established a bath in the Lâleli neighbourhood of Eminönü and another at Demirkapı, in Hatay Province.⁹⁵ Abbas Ağa also left a rich vakıf inventory.

While Abbas Ağa was in office, Yusuf Ağa was moving upward in the palace hierarchy, at the same time receiving his education. Yusuf Ağa held the positions of Gentleman-in-waiting and then Imperial Treasurer (Hazine-i Şehriyârî), becoming Chief Black Eunuch in July 1671. He survived under Sultan Mehmed IV and served under Mehmed's younger brother, Süleyman II, until 1687. As with many Chief Black Eunuchs, he was exiled to Egypt. In 1690–1691, however, whatever problem there seemed to have been between Yusuf Ağa and the Divan, the Imperial Council of the sultan seemed to have forgiven him, for he became Şeyhülharem, the governor of the town and province of Medina and the Prophet Muhammad's Chief Tomb Eunuch. He was the first exiled Chief Black Eunuch to hold the title of Chief Tomb Eunuch. While in Egypt, a major dispute arose between Yusuf Ağa and his secretary, Hasan Paşa, because of the disrespect the former Kızlar Ağa

showed toward him. However, Yusuf Ağa supposedly had a very good moral character while in Egypt, where he died circa 1690. It appears that Yusuf Ağa should receive credit for enhancing the powers that subsequent Chief Black Eunuchs would enjoy.⁹⁶

Gülnuş Emetullah (Gülnuş Emetullah Valide Sultan) was a concubine of Sultan Mehmed IV and the mother of sultans Mustafa II and Ahmed III. She was deeply interested in the awqaf of the Holy Cities and therefore, in the Chief Black Eunuch who administered them. In 1678, Gülnuş established a rich vakıf for Mecca, resulting in the expansion of the Kızlar Ağası's powerbase. Not only did Yusuf Ağa enjoy the protection and promotion of the sultan's powerful mother, but he also seemed to have garnered the political support of the father and son Grand Viziers of the powerful Köprülü family – Köprülü Mehmed Paşa (1656–1661), Köprülü Fazıl Ahmed Paşa (1661–1676) plus the former's adopted son, Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Paşa (1676–1683). They instituted the practice of promoting the palace treasurer, someone who had fiscal responsibilities, to the rank of Chief Black Eunuch:

This foundation drew its revenues from four carefully selected villages in Egypt, as well as from Cairo's Nile port of Bulaq. The endowment deed specifies as superintendent the then chief eunuch Yusuf Ağa. Ultimately, the endowment took advantage of Yusuf Ağa's distinctive relationship with Egypt, which marks something of a turning point in the institutional history of the chief harem eunuch. Both as chief harem eunuch and after his exile to Cairo in 1687, Yusuf participated as no harem eunuch had done before in the household politics of Ottoman Egypt. He certainly played a role in selecting the villages to be endowed to Gülnüş Emetullah's foundation, and in assigning their tax farms to provincial grandees with whom he enjoyed close ties.⁹⁷

A former Old Palace employee, Mustafa Ağa became Chief Black Eunuch in January–February 1687. However, he feared the Grand Vizier and wanted to retire to Egypt. After resigning with the permission of Sultan Süleyman II, he moved there where he died.⁹⁸

Like many other Chief Black Eunuchs, ambitious Ali Ağa (Hazinedar) was raised in the palace, where he was promoted to Gentlemen-in-Waiting and then Imperial Treasurer of the harem.

Following his appointment to Treasurer, however, the sultan dismissed him and then reappointed him to the same station. In October, he received his promotion to Chief Black Eunuch. His dismissal became effective during May–June 1688, whereupon he was sent to Egypt, where he died in 1713. Ali Ağa had a reputation for being ambitious.⁹⁹

Although he was in office for a comparatively short period, Ali Ağa managed to leave a couple legacies in Cairo. One is the sebil-kattab or, fountain of Ali Ağa. It was probably he who also acquired the mosque of Amir Taz and remodelled it in 1687. The building is today used as an elementary school.¹⁰⁰

Following him in office was Ahmed Ağa (Karagöz/Gedaî), formerly the manservant assigned to tutor and take care of a young sultan, probably Süleyman II. His nicknames indicate that he was an amusing person, like a character in a Turkish shadow play. Attaining the office of Chief Black Eunuch in 1689–1690, he remained in his post until 1690–1691, into the reign of Sultan Ahmed II (1691–1695). Ahmed Ağa had a reputation for his outstanding character. Although only Chief Black Eunuch for about two years, it seemed that he grew so devoted to Sultan Süleyman II to the extent that when his benefactor died, he supposedly became extremely ill and expired soon afterward.¹⁰¹

Raised in the palace where he became Palace Treasurer, İsmail Ağa (Uzun) advanced to Kızlar Ağası in 1690–1691. Uzun means 'tall', and was probably a nickname associated with his height. He only served until March–April 1692 when Grand Vizier Arabacı Ali Paşa (24 August 1691 – 21 March 1692), who would die the following year, dismissed him. It was the manner of the dismissal that caused Ali Paşa's removal from office. Apparently, Ali Paşa sent a carriage to pick up İsmail Ağa to take him to the spot where the sacking should occur. The sultan thought that the method was not proper and made Ali Paşa take the same carriage, fired him and, through that method, dishonoured him. For some reason, İsmail Ağa was asked to repay 1,000 bags of gold coin, which he did.¹⁰²

Nezir Ağa (Kaba) served as Chief Black Eunuch from 1691–1692 into March 1694, when he retired to Egypt, where he died. Raised in the palace, he received his promotion to head musahib in 1687 and then to Treasurer. İshak Ağa followed him in office after being the head steward in service for the wife of Sultan Ahmed II, who bore him a son. In office from March 1694 to February 1695, he too was exiled to Egypt following his service under two sultans.¹⁰³

Ali Ağa (Yapraksız) received his education in the palace school and, because he was supposedly smart and handsome, he was selected to be taught along with the non-Muslim children. He received a high-quality education in the school that also educated the sultan's children. Ali Ağa became a lala or a tutor who took care of a young sultan and then was sent to Egypt. About 1694–1695, Sultan Mustafa II appointed him to be Chief Black Eunuch and he returned to Istanbul. In October–November 1700, the sultan exiled him to Egypt where he died the same year. His sobriquet means 'leafless' or 'bare tree', alluding to the fact that he could not have children.¹⁰⁴

Raised in the Mabeyin area (private residence of the sultan) of the Topkapı Palace, Nezir Ağa (Solak/Kaba) rose to be the Treasurer of Sultan Ahmed II in 1691–1692 and Chief Black Eunuch in 1700–1701 for Sultan Mustafa II (Gazi). After serving for a couple years, he was exiled to the small town of Limni, Greece, currently located in the Elymnies municipality on Evia Island. He was murdered there in July–August 1703, the same year that Sultan Mustafa II was forced to abdicate the throne.

Not to be confused with the Nezir Ağa who served six years previously, Nezir Ağa (Solak/Kaba) was brave and a poet. He was left-handed as 'Kaba' suggests, humourous (he mounted his horse on the left side), and known to be an excellent shot with a musket. Before he became Chief Black Eunuch, he was Treasurer because the treasurer for Osman Paşa became handicapped. He was also the bodyguard for Hâfız Mehmed Ağa and sent to Egypt. As he was returning, he became enslaved in Malta for two years. He made his way to Edirne where an ağa who had a garden provided him money in a circuitous manner. The man told Nezir to assist him in the garden and to pull weeds in a specific area. When he obeyed, he found five sacks of gold under the plants, some of which he spent and some of which he used to provide food to his friends.

In a power showdown that clearly demonstrated not only the precariousness of one's court position but also the need for political astuteness, Nezir Ağa proved his adeptness, if only for a relatively short period. He and the Mufti both forced the resignation of Grand Vizier Amucazâde Hüsyin Paşa (Köprülü) (1697–1702) during the reign of Sultan Mustafa II (1695–1703). Sultan Mustafa II followed Süleyman II (1687–1691) and Ahmed II (1691–1695) to the throne after spending 31 years in the Cage. However, the changing of Grand Viziers and other

events catapulted the empire further into disarray, almost leading to a civil war. In the Revolt of 1703, the Janissaries and a rebel army forced the abdication of Mustafa II, who had insisted on leading his armies in the war against Hungary. During that 1697 battle, the Hungarians killed 26,000 of Mustafa's infantry and 10,000 men drowned attempting to swim to safety from a pontoon bridge.¹⁰⁵

The reign of Ahmed III (1703–1754) saw Abdurrahman Ağa (Küçük) succeed Nazır Ağa to office. He was Ağa of the old palace and, on 31 July 1704, became Kızlar Ağa. He lasted less than a year, receiving his discharge on 17 May 1704. He died in 1727–1728 and lies buried in Eyüp, north of Istanbul's Golden Horn Bridge.¹⁰⁶

Chief Black Eunuch Süleyman Ağa (Uzun) and his successor, Anber Mehmed Ağa, both suffered the same fate, that of exile. Süleyman rose to become the head ağa for the valide sultan. He then served as Kızlar Ağasi from May 1704 until March 1713, when he was exiled to Cyprus along with Imperial Treasurer and future Kızlar Ağasi, Hacı Beşir Ağa. Süleyman Ağa had a reputation for being genial, brave and generous. Anber Mehmed Ağa served as Chief Black Eunuch from March 1713 until March 1717, rising from the sultan's gentleman-in-waiting to become Treasurer before appointed Kızlar Ağa. Unlike Süleyman Ağa (Uzun), his place of exile was Egypt.¹⁰⁷

In 1715, Damad Silahdar (the Martyr) Ali Paşa, Grand Vizier (1713–1716) under Sultan Ahmed III (1703–1730), ordered the governor of Egypt to halt the castration of Africans and to cease sending eunuchs to the Sublime Porte. Like one of the Grand Viziers who preceded him, Çorlulu Ali Paşa (1706–1710), he wanted to end the power of the palace eunuchs such as Anber Mehmed Ağa. When Çorlulu Ali Paşa was a page, he reached for food out of turn and a eunuch rapped him across the knuckles. He was so humiliated that, when he became Grand Vizier, he tried unsuccessfully to eliminate the position of eunuchs. Damad Silahdar Ali Paşa might have stopped the utilisation of eunuchs and eventually, the power of the Ağa of the House of Felicity. However, he died in battle in 1716 and the Ağa of the House of Felicity remained a power until the reign of Sultan Mahmud II.¹⁰⁸ Following the Grand Vizier's death, the Black eunuchs acquired even more power and therefore, more influence over the sultans. Messages to the sultan now had to go through the hands of the Chief Black Eunuch, passed on to him by one of two officers of the Grand Vizier's household.¹⁰⁹

Mercan Ağa began his career under Ahmed III and was an outstanding Ağa of the Palace before rising to Kızlar Ağa in March 1717. He preceded the very famous Beşir Ağa I (Hacı) to office. Mercan Ağa died in 1720–1721 and his name is associated with an area around the Grand Bazaar (Kapalı Çarşı). One of its gates was named after him, but it could have been destroyed by one of the many fires. Mercan Ağa's name is also associated with the Mercan Ağa Han, or group of shops outside the Kapalı Çarşı.¹¹⁰

There is not much information about the early years of Hacı Beşir Ağa's (a.k.a. Büyük or, the Great) life before being taken to the Ottoman palace. While in early service he did learn to read and write through Chief Black Eunuch Ali Ağa (Yapraksız), and worked in the office of Sultan Ahmed III. Ahmed became sultan when Hacı Beşir became gentleman-in-waiting. In 1705, he accompanied Dâye Hatun (Princess Dâye) to Mecca, performing his hajj and earning the title 'Hacı'. Following his return to Istanbul, Hacı Beşir became Imperial Treasurer in July 1707 and then was exiled to Cyprus in 1713 with Süleyman Ağa, who was the current Kızlar Ağası. Unlike others who were appointed to the office of Dârüssaâde Ağası and then exiled to Egypt, some to become Şeyhülharem (governor of the town and province of Medina), Hacı Beşir first received his appointment as Şeyhülharem (1714) and then received his appointment as Chief Black Eunuch in 1717.¹¹¹

Mahmud I was 31 years old when he began his reign as sultan (1730–1754), while Hacı Beşir had already been Kızlar Ağası for 13 years. The new sultan had spent the previous 27 years of his life confined in the special area (Kafes) of the Topkapı Sarayı. It was under his rule that there was peace for 22 years, the longest such period in the Ottoman Empire. During that period, Hacı Beşir Ağa allowed French ambassador to the Porte, Jean-Claude Flachet, to observe a palace festival. The sultan staged that celebration for the women of the harem after which he would choose a new favourite. The Chief Black Eunuch participated in the event, according to Flachet's account that reveals some ceremonial aspects of the lofty position:

The mistress of the Harem finally presents to him the girl that most takes his fancy. No pains have been spared to ensure her success. She hastens to exhibit every pleasing talent she possesses. The handkerchief that he throws to her signifies his wish to be

alone with her. The curtain which covers the sofa on which he is sitting is made up to fall. The kızlar ağa remains to pull it aside at the first signal, and the other women, who have scattered here and there, all occupied – some with dancing, some with singing, these with playing on their instruments, and those with partaking of refreshments – all come to the kiosk in a moment to pay their respects to the sultan and congratulate the new favourite. The fete continues some time longer, and terminates by the distribution which the kızlar ağa makes of jewels, stuffs, and trinkets, following the wishes of his master. The presents are proportional to the pleasures received. But Mahmud always sees to it that they are of sufficient value for the girls to return to the Harem with an air of gratitude and contentment.¹¹²

Flachat was a French manufacturer who became First Merchant of the Port and it was through the assistance of Hacı Beşir Ağa that he gained entrance to the gardens of the harem. Flachat also said that the Chief Black Eunuch called himself ‘the favourite of sultans, the beloved of sultanas and eunuchs, and the supreme dispenser of favours of an empire’.¹¹³ Because he had served three sultans and had accumulated immense power, those sobriquets for Hacı Beşir Ağa might have been accurate. Dying in 1746–1747, he served as Kızlar Ağası for 30 years, longer than any other had served before or since his appointment:

Beginning in the mid-1690s, Beşir seems to have advanced unusually quickly through the ranks of the unofficial palace eunuch hierarchy. The rapid trajectory of his career bolsters the theory that he was patronized by, and perhaps even brought to Istanbul by, Ali Ağa (Yapraksız). He appears to have become companion of the sultan – presumably Mustafa II (r. 1695–1703) – during Ali Ağa’s (Yapraksız) tenure as chief eunuch. The sultan’s companions were a rather loosely defined inner circle of palace functionaries who had more intimate access to the sultan than anyone but his immediate family and who were, consequently, enormously influential.¹¹⁴

One historian correctly pointed out that an obvious example of the power of the Chief Black Eunuch could be observed in art. Specifically,

the work of Ottoman poet and painter Levni (Abdülcelil Çelebi) featured Beşir Ağa in the famous book of miniatures celebrating the circumcision parade for Sultan Ahmed III's four sons in 1720. In miniature 171a, Beşir Ağa is seated on a horse beside the Chief White Eunuch. Both are riding in the midst of at least 30 Bostanji on foot. In this book of 137 images called *Surname-ı* (*Book of the Procession*) Vehbî Hüseyin (Seyyid) (the calligrapher of the text), Beşir Ağa and/or other Black eunuchs appear in the following illustrations: 20b, 110b, 171a, 173b and 174a.¹¹⁵ Only a high official would have been accorded the attention in a specially illustrated and written book that ensured critical aspects of the event would be recorded for future generations.

Five Chief Black Eunuchs shared the name Beşir Ağa, one succeeding the other in office. Hacı Beşir Ağa was the donor of the Beşir Ağa mosque on the grounds of the Topkapı Palace. He also erected other buildings outside the walls of the palace. Hacı Beşir Ağa became intimately involved with the affairs of state as well as the affairs of government. As an example of his power, one of Sultan Mahmud's Grand Viziers, Kabakulak İbrahim Paşa (23 January–11 September 1731), attempted to get the sultan to appoint a new Chief Black Eunuch. Hacı Beşir Ağa found out about the plan and appealed to the valide sultan to intercede. She did, and Kabakulak İbrahim Paşa received his dismissal instead. Although Sultan Mahmud was not a person to change his mind after making a decision, he decided that it would be better to heed his mother this time.¹¹⁶

The plot to unseat Hacı Beşir Ağa provides a window into the politics of the palace and begins with Mehmed Ağa (Hacı), a palace functionary. He rose to be the administrator of the Haghia Sophia Foundation. During October–November 1716, he was assigned to Edirne to be master of the palace stable and a lieutenant of an official. On March 27, 1719, Mehmed Ağa became the head of the imperial gatekeepers, a position from which he resigned in 1730–1731.

About 1743, Mehmed Ağa had a son-in-law who worked for the former Grand Vizier Kabakulak İbrahim Paşa, and who told said son-in-law that the current Grand Vizier was considering having Hacı Beşir Ağa executed. The son-in-law relayed the information to Mehmed Ağa, who informed an imam, Sarıkçızâde Mustafa Efendi. The imam, in turn, carried that information to Hacı Beşir Ağa, who had the Grand Vizier dismissed immediately. Meanwhile, Mehmed Ağa rose to

become the head of the armoured soldiers and died in 1738–1739. He was buried in Üsküdar.¹¹⁷

Sultan Mahmud I was a weak ruler and depended on the advice of his mother, Valide Sultan Saliha, plus that of Hacı Beşir Ağa. The latter emerged 'as the power behind the throne, using the knowledge of statecraft that he had acquired by being at the centre of affairs during the reigns of the three sultans'.¹¹⁸ The two of them wielded more authority than either Mahmud or his viziers. Hacı Beşir Ağa persuaded the sultan 'to reject Nadir Shah's proposal that Iran and the Ottoman Empire accept a Shi'a group as the fifth sect of orthodox Islam'.¹¹⁹

It appears that Hacı Beşir Ağa was behind the executions of 7,000 Janissaries who had taken part in the 1730 revolt led by Patrona Halil, an Albanian ex-Janissary and second-hand clothing merchant. The revolt caused Sultan Ahmed to abdicate in favour of his nephew Mahmud. Because Patrona was still a threat, Mahmud had him and his Albanian guards ambushed on the grounds of the Topkapı Palace and then killed other supporters. Having served three previous sultans, in 1731 Hacı Beşir Ağa used his knowledge to amass his power and eliminate his enemies.¹²⁰

In the late 1730s, Hacı Beşir Ağa began to flex his power in another area of the empire. The Ottomans outfitted two major annual pilgrimages to Mecca, one leaving from Cairo and the other from Damascus. Because the powerful Azm family controlled the governorship of Damascus, they headed the caravan that set out from there. The person who commanded that route also developed powerful contacts 'with merchants, ulema and other military commanders'. This meant that the governor was gone for several months and his deputy ran affairs in Damascus. Since the Chief Black Eunuch was superintendent of the vakıfs of Mecca and Medina, he knew that the control of Damascus would greatly enhance his substantial powers because his deputy would be in control. Before his plan could be completed, Hacı Beşir Ağa died.¹²¹

Those directly involved in the pilgrimages, including the Chief Black Eunuchs, had to have amassed a lot of power and, in addition, had to be able to wield a tremendous amount of authority. It was an expensive undertaking that required access to finances and having the responsibility to account for all expenses. Just a few of the considerations would have been food for the people, rentals of and supplies for the camels, wages and rations for the baggage attendants and for both the

troops and the mercenaries, repairing fortresses and constructing new ones, digging new wells if necessary and many other necessities. There were bands of outlaws who made their living from robbing caravans so one error could cost hundreds of lives.

Hacı Beşir Ağa was an Abyssinian who was purchased for the sum of 30 piastres but who left a fortune of 30 million piastres, according to some accounts. He was the one who negotiated the 1739 Treaty of Belgrade with the Habsburg Empire and Russia that returned Serbia, Bosnia and Walachia to the Ottomans.¹²²

In the British National Archives is a message dated 24 April 1739, from a person named Rondeau to another named Harrington, shedding even more light on the power of Hacı Beşir Ağa. Sent from St Petersburg, the document stated that the Grand Vizier had been deposed and sent into exile. That official would have been Yeğen Mehmed Pasha. Further, the ambassador from Persia who was on his way to Constantinople was secretly poisoned. He had in his possession some proposals for the Porte and would have declared war if those proposals were not accepted:

On this discovery, Grand Seigneur sent for Kizlar Aga, no friend to Grand Vizier, and suggested they had enough enemies without disobliging the Persians, and asked why treaty not concluded with France. Kizlar Aga said he was not at fault and they decided to depose the Grand Vizier.¹²³

It seems obvious that the British were aware of the Chief Black Eunuch's powers. It is further evident that when a major crisis was developing, the sultan turned to him and not the Grand Vizier. Not only did Sultan Mahmud I and Hacı Beşir Ağa plot together to overthrow the sultan's absolute deputy, but we also see that the Chief Black Eunuch was working on a treaty with France. That treaty was signed in 1840. However, to maintain his considerable power, Hacı Beşir Ağa created a spy network that reported to him, reinforcing his unprecedented reign.¹²⁴

The council of viziers was convened by him and had to comply with what the almighty 'Moor' (as he was called) ordered in the name of the sultan, who was in reality dominated by the eunuch.

He controlled the finances, which worked to the advantage of the economy, although the country had suffered large territorial losses in the aftermath of Russian policies in Asia. Despite the losses and strenuous military conflicts, he succeeded in achieving the best possible outcome for his country with shrewd peace negotiations in 1741. When he died in 1747 at the age of 96, he left not only an enormous fortune, but also a well-constructed bureaucracy with outstanding barristers and administrators.¹²⁵

Mahmud frequently changed his Grand Viziers, a practice many believe his Kızlar Ağası inspired. None held office longer than three years. İbrahim Paşa (Nevşehirli Damad) remained in power until his execution following the Patrona Halil Revolt because of the large compensation he paid to the valide sultan and the Kızlar Ağası, plus his nepotism. After the discovery of another plot against the Grand Vizier and the Ağa of the Janissaries, they forced him to resign. Topal Osman Paşa (1731–1732) lasted six months. His downfall began two months following his installation when he developed animosity towards the valide sultan and the Kızlar Ağası. Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa (1732–1735) wisely attempted to attach himself to the valide sultan and Hacı Beşir Ağa. However, the latter forced him to resign in 1735 ‘in spite of so mild, wise and salutary rule’.¹²⁶

Like many devout Muslims, Hacı Beşir Ağa was deeply interested in learning, which included collecting books and manuscripts on theology, literature and history. Beşir amassed a library of 690 works in 1,007 handwritten volumes on many subjects including Persian poetry and Arabic grammar. One book dealt in dream interpretation while another delved into the history of opposing rites of Sunni Islam. It would appear that Beşir had intellectual inclinations, as did other Chief Black Eunuchs. While many volumes in his immense collection remained in Istanbul, he also founded a library of theological works in Medina and in Baghdad endowed a foundation of books. He bequeathed part of his collection to the residential college of the Turks at al-Azha University in Cairo. He also founded a theological college in Shishtov, Bulgaria and the theological college of Mahmud I in Cairo plus several drinking fountains.

A follower of the Hanafi legal rite of Sunni Islam, the official Ottoman rite, Hacı Beşir Ağa also held an interest in the Sufi orders.

He commissioned religious and charitable awqaf, including the mosque in the Topkapı Palace, a red brick and white stone külliye (religious complex) near the Topkapı Palace, a theological school for the study of the oral traditions of the Prophet at Istanbul's Eyüp cemetery and a Koranic school located over a fountain in Cairo.¹²⁷

Hacı Beşir Ağa built the külliye in 1745 and it is located on the Köşkü Caddesi, just down the hill and to the left of the Topkapı Palace. It has a mosque, a sebیل (wash fountain), a medrese and a dervish monastery that is no longer active. Beneath the building are shops. Today the complex 'serves as a cultural centre for Turks of Western Thrace, which is now part of Greece'.¹²⁸

Between 29 August and 7 September 1745, the sultan granted a deed to Hacı Beşir Ağa that reflected the great wealth he had accumulated and his expanding influence. He decided to build a lighthouse at the Danube Delta that would be part of a new port. The location was to be at the town of Sulina, the easternmost point of Romania. Beşir would finance that project, so the sultan granted him ownership of a parcel of wilderness that would surround the lighthouse. However, Hacı Beşir Ağa died before construction could begin.¹²⁹

In 1715, two years before Hacı Beşir Ağa became Chief Black Eunuch and was still Chief Tomb Eunuch in Medina, he commissioned a Qur'anic school built above a public drinking fountain (sebیل-mekteb) in Cairo. Besides providing Cairo with another source for clean water, orphaned and poor boys received a basic religious education. While lessons were taking place above the fountain area, functionaries inside the lower fountain base passed out water to outsiders. Hacı Beşir Ağa's successor, Moralı Beşir Ağa, built a similar one across the road 40 years later.¹³⁰

The Chief Black Eunuch was 'the superintendent of all imperial foundations that supported the two Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina' plus other cities in Balkan and Arab provinces. Besides restoring several monuments in Istanbul, between 1729 and 1745 he also 'endowed two mosques, madrasas, boys' schools, convents [tekkes], a library, and no less than thirteen fountains scattered between Üsküdar, Eyüp, Beşiktaş, Fatih and the area around the Sublime Porte in the old city'.¹³¹

By 1598, the supervision of the imperial endowments under the Chief Black Eunuchs was expanded to include supervision of those founded not only by the sultans, but also their wives, Grand Viziers, members of the

court, other Black eunuchs and deceased women of the harem. For example, on one rare occurrence, a court was set up with Hacı Beşir Ağa to settle an issue surrounding one of the harem women. However, by the end of the century, either the Chief Black Eunuch or the Ağa of the Old Palace began to increasingly appear in court. During the eighteenth century, Chief Black Eunuchs controlled 42 per cent of the royal endowments.¹³²

Purchased 'for a mere thirty piastres' Hacı Beşir Ağa died a wealthy man. On 3 June 1746, he died a natural death at age 96 while at his waterside residence in Bahariye, Eyüp. Some doubt that was his true age because it seems impossible for someone that old to maintain such an important role in the palace. Whatever the case may be, he served as Ağa of the House of Felicity for 30 years. His estate included a great deal of money, 160 horses and 800-jewelled watches.¹³³ While in offices he received 1,000 coins each month as a stipend as well as presents and bribes people gave who were coming from Istanbul or the countryside and who had business in the palace. Documents such as stock certificates, land registers and foundation accounts found in the Topkapı Palace archives provide an idea of his true worth. Because there were no heirs, the imperial treasury could confiscate everything in his estate not associated with awqaf. There were various confiscation attempts throughout the Ottoman Empire because Hacı Beşir Ağa 'had clients and properties in virtually every province'.¹³⁴ Hacı Beşir Ağa's final resting place is his tomb in Eyüp.

Beşir Ağa II, also called Moralı Beşir Ağa, Beşir the Younger, Hâfız Beşir Ağa, Hattat Beşir Ağa and Hacı Beşir II, succeeded Hacı Beşir Ağa to office on 4 June 1746, serving only Mahmud I. 'Hâfız' is one who memorises the Qur'an and 'Hattat' designates a calligrapher. Moralı Beşir was a skilled calligrapher, an expert horseman, a marksman, a wrestler and a patron of poetry. He served in the palace as Gentleman-in-Waiting and head of the White eunuchs (Hazine Dar Başı) in the Treasury. His predecessor, Hacı Beşir Ağa I, appointed him to the Hazine Dar Başı position, almost guaranteeing that he would be the next Kızlar Ağası.

Moralı Beşir Ağa's name derived from Morea, an area of southern Greece. He had been a slave of a future governor of Morea, Ahmed Paşa, who presented Moralı Beşir to Mahmud I before he became sultan. Moralı Beşir was both ambitious and corruptible, bribing state officials to follow his wishes.

Because he desired to acquire some type of skill, Beşir Ağa II took private lessons in Turkish calligraphy from Hafız Mustafa Efendi, the imam of Hasırcılar, and Mumcuzade Mehmed Ağa, an instructor at the Enderun, the palace school, from whom he received his accreditation. His graduation took place before a large committee. The style that he used in writing and composition was revolutionary for the time and led to the advancement of Turkish calligraphy. Examples of his gifted work included the following:

- (1) The inscriptions above the imaret (a hostel/soup kitchen for pilgrims) facing the Bab-ı Humayun (Imperial Gate of the Topkapı Serayî) near Ayasofya (Haghia Sophia) (1743).
- (2) Inscriptions above the door of Skeuflakion built by the Byzantines and used as storage (1743).
- (3) A fountain tablet that was across from the Ayasofya and next to the water balance (1747).
- (4) Two fountain tablets outside the Emir Mosque in Bursa (1743).
- (5) Fountain tablet that was adjacent to the outer door of Hacı Beşir Ağa Külliye (1744).
- (6) The inscriptions in the Kalenderhane Camii (Church of the Kyriotissa) on Şehzadebaşı Caddesi (1747).
- (7) The inscriptions in the Şehzadegan (sons and male descendants of the sultan) School in the Topkapı Palace (1748).
- (8) Handwritten script found in the Topkapı Palace library, Security Treasury #2080, 2801 and a paper found in the Fine Writings Section, #726.

From many accounts of the time, Moralı Beşir Ağa wielded a lot of influence but used it primarily for personal gain. He loved money and made a fortune illegally. He sold handwritten editions of the Qur'an plus books that famous calligraphers such as the noted Şeyh Hamdullah, Mustafa Dede and Hafız produced. Moralı Beşir Ağa would use trickery or just take the works from their owners, using force if necessary.¹³⁵

Noted Ottoman historian, author and diplomat Ahmed Resmi Efendi wrote a pamphlet in which he described a ruse that Moralı Beşir Ağa perpetrated for his own gain. The Kızlar Ağası located a handwritten Qur'an in the palace that Şeyh Hamdullah wrote and assigned it to one

of the palace workers. He was to take it to the Sahaflar Çarşısı (Book Bazaar area of the Grand Bazaar) and sell it. Right away, he sent a second worker and had him tell the Book Bazaar tradesmen that Beşir Ağa wanted to own a Qur'an written by Şeyh Hamdullah and if they could locate and purchase one and give it to them, he would be very pleased. The tradesmen were afraid of him and collected a hundred golden coins to purchase the Qur'an for Beşir Ağa, sending it to him as a gift. Upon receipt of both the coins and the Qur'an, he returned the book from where he obtained it and kept the money.¹³⁶

Having at one point managed to have his man appointed grand vizier, this Beşir was so bold as to call the highest officer of the Ottoman Empire his personal apprentice. He had no scruples. At another time, when he was at first unsuccessful in bringing about the dismissal of a grand vizier, he had a fire set in Istanbul and the vizier blamed for it, thus gaining his end.¹³⁷

Beşir Ağa II had anyone removed from office who did not support him, so people were afraid of him. Regarding the Grand Vizier associated with the fires, Beşir Ağa spread the word that his rival was jinxed because he would not fall in line. The ruse worked and the sultan sacked the Grand Vizier. Anyone who wanted a job in the public arena had to pay Beşir Ağa large bribes and everyone dishonoured their positions by going along with him. His collaborators insulted public officials and even religious officers if they failed to toe the line. His six-year reign of terror raised the fear that some soldiers were going to revolt on a scale of the infamous Patrona Halil Rebellion that ended with the abdication of Sultan Ahmed III in 1730. Sultan Mehmed I received some secret information about the impending rebellion and imprisoned Beşir Ağa and followers.¹³⁸

James Caulfeild, the fourth Viscount Charlemont, began a tour of the European continent in 1746. Supposedly 'rich, handsome, well bred, amorous, impressionable and in his eighteenth year', he arrived in The Hague in the fall of that year. In June 1749, he sailed from Malta to Constantinople. Although he praised the sultan, it was obvious that he despised the Chief Black Eunuch Beşir Ağa. It was in Athens that he first mentioned the Kızlar Ağa, whom he referred to as an 'emasculate monster'.¹³⁹ Caulfeild described Beşir Ağa as one who possessed 'the

Sultan's ear and favour and indirectly governs the Empire'.¹⁴⁰ Further, another depiction of the Chief Black Eunuch riding with the sultan seems to descend into racist diatribe and irrationality.

Immediately after the Sultan, and close to his person, rode the Kislar Aga, or Chief of the Black eunuchs, superbly mounted upon a fine horse richly caparisoned and followed by a numerous train of attendants. I could not avoid being sensibly struck, I may almost say with horror, by the extraordinary figure of this personage. If as it is said with great appearance of probability, deformity be an excellence in black eunuchs, this monster may undoubtedly claim such a degree of superiority in this whimsical pre-eminence as justly to merit to be their chief. So ugly a human – if human it can be called, and if ugliness were a term strong enough to express his deformity – my eyes never beheld. Even white men, who have undergone this shameful operation, are generally so impaired by it in their figure as to become objects of detestation. What then must be its effects upon the nastiest, the most deformed of all negroes?¹⁴¹

His arrogance led to Beşir Ağa's undoing. In 1752, he had a Muslim judge (kadı) whipped by another eunuch. The judge complained and Beşir had his men demolish the judge's house and the judge along with it. The judge, however, was a member of the ulema, the supervisory body of religious scholars. They warned Mahmud that if he wanted to keep the throne, he had better get rid of Beşir. While Beşir Ağa was imprisoned, the new Grand Vizier, Bahir Mustafa Paşa (1752–1755), convinced the sultan that he should execute the Chief Black Eunuch. Sultan Mahmud tricked Beşir into going to one of his pleasure palaces on the Bosphorus and, upon arrival, turned him over to the head gardener. The head gardener took him to the Maiden's Tower (Tower of Leander or, Kız Kulesi) and had him killed and his head displayed on the walls of the Seraglio. If Beşir had not been so presumptuous as to kill a member of the ulema, the sultan would have exiled him to Egypt to enjoy retirement.¹⁴²

Beşir Ağa, a noted calligrapher, did construct public fountains in various districts in Istanbul and had the Kalenderhane Mosque in the Şehzadebaşı neighbourhood reconstructed. He was also responsible for

the construction of mosques in the Mercan and Sultanahmet areas of Istanbul. Beşir Ağa also supervised the construction of Sultan Mehmed I's medrese in 1750 Cairo, the first that the Ottomans ever constructed in Egypt. However, those and other good deeds did not begin to make amends for his corruption and conceit. He lies buried in a dervish cemetery in Üsküdar's Doğançılar area.¹⁴³

Furthermore, in 1752, Hatice Usta, a slave of Beşir Ağa, financed a mosque near Beyazidiye known as the Yahnıkapanı Sokağı Camii, the Mosque of the Street of the Smart Boy. With her religious endowment she also built a fountain next to the mosque plus an elementary school in the area. It was one of many examples of women's contributions to architecture as well as their religious devotion. Further, this is an illustration of the possible wealth that slaves were able to accumulate when the owner was a powerful slave such as Beşir Ağa.

Beşir Ağa III (Hazineci) was raised in the palace where he too became a gentleman-in-waiting and Harem Treasurer. In June–July 1752, he succeeded his namesake as Chief Black Eunuch, serving until August 1755, about a month following the fire that destroyed most of Istanbul. He died in Egypt where he spent the remainder of his life in exile.

Ahmed Ağa (Ebûvukuf) served as Chief Black Eunuch to Osman III (1754–1757) from August 1755 until October–November 1757. Previously, he was the Ağa of the Palace and then sent to Egypt until Osman III summoned him back. He played a pivotal role in international politics and palace intrigue because his position as Kızlar Ağası allowed him to direct access to the sultan. Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, was a diplomat with the French Foreign Office under French kings Louis XIV through Louis XVI. Austria, Denmark, France, England, Poland, Prussia, Sweden and Russia were concocting plans that would pit some countries against others. France wanted Turkey to make 'conspicuous manoeuvres on the Russian and Polish frontiers'. She feared that if 'the liaison between England, Austria, and Russia were not broken up [...] Sweden, Poland and Prussia might succumb to the combined pressures of the alliance':¹⁴⁴

Once assured of a victory over these three powers, the Czarina and Maria Theresa would have their armies free to attack the Ottoman Empire whenever a favourable opportunity arose. Vergennes had to

make the Sultan understand [...] that it was to his own interest to concern himself with the fate of Sweden, Poland, and Prussia, for, as long as these powers stood, Vienna and St. Petersburg would think twice before launching an attack on the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴⁵

France attempted to engineer an official foreign policy plus a covert one. The latter was not only for Turkey to strongly support France's plans but also to sign a treaty of friendship containing a secret clause that would guarantee Poland's integrity. France wanted to pull together Prussia, Sweden, Denmark, Turkey and itself 'to protect Poland from Russian aggression, and to prevent the court of Vienna from placing Prince Charles of Lorraine, the younger brother of the Emperor Francis I, on the Polish throne when it became vacant'. It was Vergennes' job in this complex situation to curry the support of Turkey to that it would take a stronger stance against Russia. However, Vergennes had to go through both the Grand Vizier and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to achieve his goals and the Grand Vizier did not seem to understand France's plans. The Minister of Foreign Affairs convinced Vergennes that only he could get the plans to the sultan through the Chief Black Eunuch, Ahmed Ağa. Vergennes prepared 'a memorandum outlining the Ottoman Empire's interest in Polish security, and the dangers represented by Russia'.

Things did not turn out as planned as the sultan had Grand Vizier Behir Mustafa Paşa beheaded and the latter's chief minister deposed. The Minister of Foreign Affairs received a promotion, a Crimean Khan was deposed and could not send his report on Russian fortifications to the sultan, plus Janissaries in the provinces began an uprising. Other factors also inhibited Vergennes' plans, including discussions of bribes. In the midst of that potential conflict, the Chief Black Eunuch's role was central to granting France the ear of Sultan Osman III, even if he was only to move some correspondence around the Grand Vizier.¹⁴⁶

Another of Ahmed Ağa's attempts failed when he attempted to remove a political rival from office. As the sultan lay dying, Ahmed Ağa decided that it would be a perfect time to oust Grand Vizier Koca Ragıb Paşa (1757–1763) from office and instal his choice, Kapdan Ali Paşa. After receiving a warning about the Chief Black Eunuch's plans, Ragıb hid until Osman died and Mustafa III (1757–1789) gained the throne. He then appeared at the palace and received a reappointment from the

new sultan. In later years, Grand Vizier Koca Ragıb Paşa became a celebrated poet. Any strong Grand Vizier, however, was likely to be at odds with the Kızlar Ağası.¹⁴⁷

The intensity of the contention between Grand Vizier Koca Ragıb Paşa and Ahmed Ağa (Ebûvukuf) was obvious in the incident over the appointment of Husayn ibn al-Makki as governor of Damascus. Husayn was a protégé of Ahmed Ağa and used his influence to garner the position that the Azm family of Syria monopolized. The scenario reflected the attempt of Hacı Beşir Ağa to control Damascus because of its centrality in the pilgrimage to Mecca. Ahmed Ağa's protégé, however, did not have the power of the Azm family and did not have ties to the Bedouins who lived along the pilgrimage route. The result was disastrous.

Upon returning from the pilgrimage, Bedouins 'stripped men and women alike of their money and clothing' and placed their hands on the genitals of both. They then abandoned the pilgrims in the desert where 20,000 of them died from thirst, heat and hunger. Some attempted to drink urine to stay alive. Although Husayn ibn al-Makki did not enjoy such high status again, Ahmed Ağa was not so fortunate.¹⁴⁸

Koca Ragıb Paşa decided that no Chief Black Eunuch should exercise such authority and moved to end such formidable power for the future. The Grand Vizier was certainly aware of the considerable authority that the deceased Hacı Beşir Ağa had wielded through his tenure as Chief Black Eunuch. He worked to ensure that Chief Black Eunuchs, including Ahmed Ağa, would never again unilaterally 'determine the most important imperial appointments and the course of imperial strategy'.¹⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Ahmed Ağa (Ebûvukuf) was exiled to Egypt in October–November 1757. He probably did not leave Istanbul because on 27 November, he was executed on orders of Grand Vizier Ragıb Paşa at the Boğaz-kesen Hisarı, known today as the Rumeli Hisarı. It is the castle Mehmed II built in 1452 to conquer the city and that today abuts the campus of Boğaziçi University. Ahmed Ağa knew many people and, as seen previously, worked on many political issues. To many, nonetheless, he was highly problematical.

There was another but not the last Beşir Ağa who followed Ahmed Ağa (Ebûvukuf) to office. Musahib Beşir Ağa (IV) was a gentleman-in-waiting before attaining the office of Kızlar Ağası in November 1757.

However, he died in June of the following year, opening the position for Mercan Ağa, who received his promotion in June 1768. Mercan Ağa moved quickly through the ranks previously serving as Imperial Treasurer. He died in 1772 and was buried in the Ayazma area of Üsküdar, on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Ayazma, meaning 'sacred spring', refers to the time when people believed that some waters had curative powers. Mercan Ağa's remains are located near the fountain and courtyard of the Baroque-styled Ayazma Mosque in Üsküdar.¹⁵⁰

Cevher Ağa (Hazineci) was head of the palace and Imperial Harem Treasurer until his appointment as Kızlar Ağası on 8 February 1772. He served in that capacity until exiled to Egypt on 8 February 1774. During his tenure, Cevher Ağa was in the middle of negotiations regarding the Russo–Turkish War that lasted from 1768 until 1774. This is another instance of the power that some Chief Black Eunuchs were able to wield. The Ottomans were attempting to secretly negotiate with Great Britain to help guarantee that the Russians would not become the dominant power in the Black Sea. At the same time, it appeared that many in the Porte desired to continue the war, particularly when the British representative did not have the power to make decisions.

In the midst of those negotiations, Sultan Mustapha III died on 24 December 1773, and deliberations became muddled. The ministers began to positively consider the role of British mediation and Cevher Ağa informed the British representative of those leanings. By April 1774, the Porte began to rethink its decision once more regarding Great Britain's role, favouring their noninvolvement. A major cause was that Cevher Ağa, the main support behind involving the British, had been retired and sent to Egypt. In any event, July 1774 saw the signing of the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca that ended the war with Russia.¹⁵¹

Cevher Ağa also served in Medina, where he received the summons to become Imperial Treasurer again. Meanwhile, Beşir Ağa V (Sarıkçı) was Chief Black Eunuch for about five years until Cevher's reappointment in July–August 1780. Cevher resigned in May 1783 and eventually died in Medina. Both men served Sultans Mustafa III and Abdül Hamit I.

Unfortunately, Beşir Ağa V (Sarıkçı) did not seem to live up to the reputation of his namesakes. He attained the rank of Palace Ağa (Gentleman Attendant at the Palace) and when Sultan Abdül Hamit I was a young prince, Beşir was his tutor. When Abdül Hamit became

sultan, Beşir became his gentleman-in-waiting. He attained the rank of Chief Black Eunuch in February 1774 but did not seem to have the necessary skills. It appears that he was foolish and confused everything. During July–August 1779, he was exiled to Medina to assume another position and died there a few years later.¹⁵²

The last of the three Chief Black Eunuchs to serve Sultan Abdül Hamit I (1774–1789) was İdris Ağa. He took the typical path to power through his appointment as Imperial Treasurer. On 3 June 1783, he became Kızlar Ağası, serving until his dismissal in 1789–1790. While in office, İdris Ağa witnessed a plague in Istanbul that killed approximately a third of the city's population (1786) and a fire that destroyed a great part of the city (1787). On the night Selim III (1789–1807) succeeded Abdül Hamit I as sultan because of the latter's demise, Selim chose İdris Ağa to show him the body of his deceased uncle as proof of death, settling any dispute on ascension to the throne. Following his discharge, İdris Ağa received the appointment of Şeyhülharem (governor of the town and province of Medina) in November 1793, an extremely important administrative post. İdris Ağa died in December 1796.¹⁵³

Selim III (1789–1807) brought a Dr Neale to Istanbul to consult on the condition of his ill mother. Neale penned an invaluable description of the Chief Black Eunuch because he was a medical doctor, even if he was biased. Typically, an astonished European male described an unnamed 'ugly' Kızlar Ağası who held authority after İdris Ağa.¹⁵⁴ That eunuch might have been Bilâl Ağa (Büyük), Selim III's first of three to serve him as Kızlar Ağası. Bilâl Ağa was a distinguished person and when Selim became sultan, Bilâl became his gentleman-in-waiting and then Hazine-i Humayun Vikili, the fifth-ranked Black eunuch of the imperial household. Afterward he received his promotion to the rank of Imperial Treasurer. His appointment to Kızlar Ağası occurred in 1790. Unfortunately, he was ill and unable to work very well. He died of that affliction in 1791–1792.¹⁵⁵

Following Bilâl Ağa (Büyük) were Halid Ağa and Bilâl Ağa (Küçük). In Turkish, 'büyük' and 'küçük' mean 'large' and 'small' respectively. The terms could refer to a person's size but, in successive names, refers to 'the older' and 'the recent' or outside of familial connotations, 'senior' and 'junior'. The person serving between the two Bilâl Ağası, Halid Ağa, received his appointment as Chief Black Eunuch in 1791–1792, after serving as Imperial Treasurer. He died on 29 August 1798, and was

buried in the courtyard of the vast Valide Sultan Mihrişah külliye in Eyüp, built in memory of Mihrişah, the mother of Selim III.¹⁵⁶

In the palace, Bilâl Ağa (Küçük) had the sobriquet of 'Halil Paşlı' because he was the slave of Ivâz Mehmed Paşazâde Halil Paşa. He was taken to the palace during the reign of Sultan Mustafa III (1757–1774). After Sultan Selim III ascended to the throne in 1789, Bilâl Ağa (Küçük) was promoted to gentleman-in-waiting and then to the fifth-ranked Black eunuch of the palace. He promotion to Imperial Treasurer occurred in 1797–1798 and to Dârrüsaâde Ağası on 29 August 1798, following the death of Halid Ağa. Bilâl Ağa was a religious and charitable person who used his resources to construct some public works, including a fountain. After his death on 27 March 1807, he was also buried in the al-Muwaylihi courtyard of the Valide Sultan Mihrişah religious complex in Eyüp.¹⁵⁷

Mercan Ağa (Küçük) received his appointment as Kızlar Ağası from Sultan Mustafa IV during March 1807 and met his grisly demise immediately after Sultan Mahmud II ascended to the throne in July 1808. He was Hazine-i Vikili, or the fifth-ranked Black eunuch of the imperial household and then Imperial Treasurer until his promotion in March 1807. His is part of a story of an internecine struggle that could easily have ended in his favour, but did not.¹⁵⁸

Many believed Sultan Mustafa IV to be mentally ill when he gained the throne in 1807. In a palace intrigue in which one sultan lost the throne and a future sultan lost his life, the Chief Black Eunuchs played a central role. The Janissaries, elite corps of the Ottoman army, plus religious students, deposed Sultan Selim III (1789–1807). On orders from sultan-in-waiting Mustafa IV, Chief Black Eunuch Mercan Ağa (Küçük) and his men caught dethroned Sultan Selim III in the prayer room that he built near the apartment of his mother and stabbed him to death, making him the only sultan not killed by strangulation. To control the line of descent, Mustafa wanted Selim III, plus cousin and possible future sultan, Mahmud II, murdered. That would have made Mustafa the sole remaining male of the imperial dynasty. Mustafa's plan partially failed, though, and Mahmud II ascended to the throne nevertheless.¹⁵⁹

Although Sultan Mustafa IV managed to have Sultan Selim III dethroned, almost a year later, 20,000 supporters camped on the palace grounds to reinstall him. Again, the palace eunuchs played a central role

in spoiling the plans of Mustafa IV. Although the current Kızlar Ağası was supporting the takeover of Mustafa IV, palace eunuchs Kasım Ağa, İsa Ağa and Anber Mehmed Ağa (all who would become Kızlar Ağası) attempted to save the life of Prince Selim but arrived too late. They rushed to Prince Mahmud's chambers to protect him but he was already hiding in another chamber. The executioners and the eunuchs with their allies arrived at the chamber almost at the same time. Kasım Ağa was successfully holding off the attackers outside the chamber until one of them threw a knife that wounded him. The woman hiding the prince began to throw hot ashes on the attackers, planning to delay the killers so that Prince Mahmud could climb inside the chimney to the roof. Cerriye Kalfa then called out to İsa Ağa and Anber Mehmed Ağa, telling them to assist the prince. The killers rushed the room, knocking out Cerriye Kalfa and wounding Prince Mahmud with a thrown knife. Mahmud climbed through the chimney to the roof while the two eunuchs defended him. At that moment, the outside forces led by Alemdar Mustafa Paşa entered the palace hoping to save Selim and his nephew Mahmud and the executioners fled.¹⁶⁰

Mahmud II (1808–1839) was 23 when he became sultan. Rather than killing the deposed Sultan Mustafa IV, he placed him in a confined apartment in the Topkapı Sarayı. Then he appointed a new Grand Vizier, his rescuer Alemdar Mustafa Paşa (1808), who ordered his men to kill anyone responsible for the death of Sultan Selim III. On the very day Mahmud became sultan in 1808, 'thirty-three heads were exposed at the gate of the seraglio, among which, the hideous deformity of the chief black eunuch's [Mercan Ağa (Küçük)] shone conspicuously on a silver dish, allotted to him on account of the dignity of his office'.¹⁶¹ However, Alemdar Mustafa Paşa committed suicide the year of his appointment when Sultan Mahmud II declined to protect him from a Janissary attack.

It appears that there was a witness to events leading up to the death of Mercan Ağa. Cyrus Hamlin, the American founder of Robert College in Istanbul, which became Boğaziçi University, conversed with Çelebi Yorgaki, the former merchant for the palace. Yorgaki was in the palace when Sultan Mustafa IV was dethroned. Yorgaki and Chief Black Eunuch Mercan were friends but the former still feared for his life. However, allies told Yorgaki not to fear. He did see the Chief Black Eunuch being taken away and reflected that, just two days earlier,

Mercan was settling palace accounts. Now, Mahmud II would be enthroned as the new sultan and Mercan Ağa was being led to his execution.

'Ah!' said he, 'Çelebi Yorgaki, how bitter is the last hour of life' and tears rolled down his great black cheeks. 'He had always treated me well,' said Yorgaki, 'and I felt I could almost die for him; but in a few minutes his body rolled down that plank-shoot into the water'.¹⁶²

Anber Mehmed Ağa had been a tutor to the young Sultan Mahmud II in 1808 and received a promotion to Imperial Treasurer. From 24 October 1813, to 14 September 1815, he served as Kızlar Ağası, after which he was exiled to Şam'a (Syria). In 1822–1823, he received a promotion to the governorship of the city and province of Medina and died in 1826–1827. Anber Mehmed Ağa was supposedly loyal and of good character, as evidenced when he and other eunuchs risked their lives to save Sultan Mahmud II.¹⁶³

A former Palace Ağa who worked for Anber Mehmed Ağa, the second Kızlar Ağası of Mahmud II was İsmâ Ağa (Hâfız), whose soubriquet is used for someone who knows the Qur'an by heart. Because of his loyalty, he rose to become the sultan's gentleman-in-waiting and the fifth-ranked Black eunuch of the palace. Afterward he became Treasurer. On 14 September 1815, İsmâ Ağa received his promotion to Kızlar Ağası, a post he held until 1820 when he received his dismissal following some type of dispute with Silahdar Ali Ağa, who became Grand Vizier for a few months in 1823. İsmâ Ağa became sheik (governor) of the city and province of Medina in 1826–1827 and held that position until he quit in 1836–1837 and died subsequently. İsmâ Ağa, like other Chief Black Eunuchs, donated a considerable amount to charities and endowed waqfs, including 'a considerable sum to provide candles, oils, and medications for sick eunuchs of the harem'.¹⁶⁴

During the last years İsmâ Ağa (Hâfız) held office, Derviş Mehmed Pasha received his promotion to Grand Vizier (1818–1820), serving as another example of the powers of some of the Kızlar Ağalar. Derviş Mehmed Pasha was a Circassian slave of a former Chief Black Eunuch for whom he managed and administered his owner's properties. The skills that he obtained also allowed him to amass a great fortune for himself.

After coming to the sultan's attention, Derviş Mehmed Pasha received the appointment to administer the affairs of the empire. The slave of a slave was able to rise to one of the highest positions in the Ottoman Empire, thanks to the proficiencies that he garnered. Perhaps it was no coincidence that both İsmâ Ağa and Derviş Mehmed Pasha had their positions terminated about the same time, for they certainly must have known each other and probably even worked together occasionally. If Sultan Mahmud II wanted to make sweeping changes, he certainly would have wanted to dismiss those two extremely powerful and influential men who had established their own patronage systems. Ahmed Ağa (Küçük) followed İsmâ Ağa in office, serving between 1820 until late 1822.¹⁶⁵

Ebûbekir Ağa's career provides another insight regarding how one became Imperial Treasurer, and then Kızlar Ağası. He was the main door slave for the Hadice Sultan, the woman who bore the sultan a son, and then was taken to the Enderun where he became the main door slave in his new post. Known for his intelligence and his virtuous behaviour, he rose to Imperial Treasurer in 1815 and then to Kızlar Ağası on 19 September 1823. He died on 13 November 1825 and was buried at the Hamideye Mausoleum (the Abdülhamid I Türbe). Ebûbekir Ağa's relatively short tenure catapulted Abdullah Ağa (Leylek) (Uzun) to the Kızlar Ağası post in September–October 1823. His nicknames are 'stork' and 'tall', referring to his height. Raised in the palace and promoted to become the sultan's main companion or gentleman-in-waiting, Abdullah Ağa managed to hold on to his position for at least 17 years. He resigned during January–February 1840 and died shortly afterward. He is buried in the Çamlıca Selâmî Efendi cemetery, located in a neighbourhood of Üsküdar.¹⁶⁶

According to Fanny Davis in her work, the powers of the Kızlar Ağası post began to be trimmed during the latter part of the reign of Sultan Mehmed II. He reorganized the government and, in 1834, the administration of the Holy Cities and the imperial vakıfs began to be taken away from the Chief Black Eunuchs and placed in a newly created government department, the Ministry of Vakıfs.¹⁶⁷ That certainly did not curb all of the powers of the Kızlar Ağa, because they still were able to maintain and exert influence in many other areas.

During Abdullah Ağa's tenure, however, an observer noted how Sultan Mahmud II allowed some of his palace eunuchs and courtiers to skip ranks in the Ottoman army. They had little or no military experience, such as

Said Mehmed Ağa. He was an attendant in the sultan's private residence and in 1834 was given the rank of brigadier-general. A few years later he was promoted to Ser Asker (assistant commander-in-chief). Supposedly, other officers felt they had no reason to work hard to achieve higher rank if promotions were doled out to favourites.

In 1834, French traveller Marshal Marmont, Duc de Raguse, observed cavalry brigadier general Reşid Paşa. His racist comments reveal nothing about the abilities of the person he noticed, but do convey European reactions to Blacks with power, including eunuchs. Abdullah Ağa was still Chief Black Eunuch and undoubtedly knew both military men and might have had something to do with their appointments:

A black eunuch as a general of brigade! In Turkey it does not seem contrary to reason to invest with a military dignity requiring strength, energy, and courage, a degraded being whose condition implies weakness and pusillanimity, and who can never be supposed to acquire an ascendancy over the minds of other men.¹⁶⁸

Like many other European travellers, Charles Colville Frankland did not comprehend the power of the Chief Black Eunuch. On 18 April 1827, he witnessed Sultan Mahmud II and his entourage heading for a mosque and a group of women in the crowd attempting to submit a petition to the ruler. The sultan indicated Abdullah Ağa should receive it, which he did with much ceremony. Franklin was amused and, at the same time, seemed to react negatively because 'this guardian of the purity of the Ottoman blood seemed to be of much more consequence than his Imperial Master, and bowed and showed his white teeth, and blessed the people with his hand in all the consequence and vanity of his brethren of the coast of Guinea, or the Caribee Islands'.¹⁶⁹

Two Chief Black Eunuchs with the same name of Abdullah served one after the other. Abdullah Ağa's (Paşa Cırağı) rise to the Kızlar Ağası post again demonstrates the expertise that one had to acquire. Raised in the palace, he became the sultan's gentleman-in-waiting in 1825–1826. He received his promotion to the fifth-ranked Black eunuch of the imperial household in 1826–1827 and then Imperial Treasurer in 1829–1830. Abdullah Ağa became Kızlar Ağası in January–February 1840, but died in August of the same year, as did his predecessor. He is buried in Eyüp, a village noted for its majestic mausoleums.¹⁷⁰

After serving as lala (tutor) to Sultan Abdülmecid I (1 July 1839 – 25 June 1861), Tâhir Ağa received his appointment to Kızlar Ağası in August 1840. He was the third of 11 to hold that post during Abdülmecid's 22-year rule. Tâhir Ağa died in 1844 and lies buried in Eyüp.¹⁷¹ Following Tâhir Ağa was Tayfur Ağa, who was raised in the palace and as a palace official, was the fifth-ranked Black eunuch of the imperial household (Hazine-i Vikili). In September–October 1844, his promotion to the Kızlar Ağası post was realized. Perhaps because of his intelligence, Tayfur Ağa received a promotion to Şeyhülharem, the governor of the city and province of Medina, in April–May 1850. However, he died in Medina during the following year.¹⁷²

It was during the reign of Tayfur Ağa that Bezm-i Âlem (Bezmiâlem), the mother of Sultan Abdülmecit I, founded a hospital through her charitable endowment in 1845. Apparently, traditional Ottoman concepts of health and medicine were practised along with some Western techniques. Miri Shefer's article revealed that aspects of the hospital administrations were associated with 'the most powerful figure' of the Chief Black Eunuch. This would have meant that Tayfur Ağa would have had to ensure that a new reporting system was maintained that included detailed records of expenditures, not just bottom line expenditures, something quite new. The article also referenced an observation concerning the hospital roles of Chief Black Eunuchs going back at least to the early 1600s.¹⁷³

It appears that the noted traveller Evliya Çelebi observed the centrality of the Chief Black Eunuch to hospitals while travelling around Istanbul between 1668 and 1671. Sultan Ahmed I (1603–1617) built a mosque complex close to the imperial palace that also contained a hospital. It was mainly for people with mental illnesses and was located in an area that had pure air, both environmentally and religiously, because of the closeness to the mosque. The attendants were 'remarkable' and good natured because they were 'under the immediate inspection of the kızlar ağhâsı, who himself attends to inquire into the state of the sick'. According to Evliya Çelebi, the Chief Black Eunuch, perhaps Abbas Ağa, visited the hospital, asked about the patients' health and 'caused the staff to show extraordinary patience and good-nature'.¹⁷⁴ It would appear that the positive qualities exhibited by Tayfur Ağa were modelled on that of previous men in his position.

The Dolmabahçe Sarayı (Dolmabahçe Palace complex) was 'the largest and grandest by far of the imperial palaces on the Bosphorus'. Sultan Mehmed II was the first to make an older residence, Beşiktaş Palace, his principal one, preferring it to the Topkapı Sarayı. Sultan Abdülmecid (1839–1861) had a new Dolmabahçe Sarayı built by 1854 and moved in during 1856. It became the principal residence of all the succeeding sultans except for Abdül Hamit II:

The central part of the palace is a great imperial state hall flanked by the two main wings containing the state room and the royal apartments, the selamlık on one side and the harem on the other, with the apartment of the Sultan Valide [sultan's mother] in a separate wing linked to the harem through the apartment of the Crown Prince, and with an additional harem for his women and those of the other princes, and then still another residence at the northwest corner of the palace for the Kızlar Ağası, the Chief Black Eunuch. The palace complex also included rooms for those of the palace staff who lived within Dolmabahçe as well as kitchens, an imaret to feed the staff, a pharmacy, stables, carriage houses, and barracks for the halberdiers who guarded the imperial residence. All in all, there are a total of 285 rooms, 43 salons, six balconies, and six hamams on three stories.¹⁷⁵

Râsim Mehmed Ağa, Chief Black Eunuch from January until August 1856 and Tahsin Ağa, who held that position from August 1856 until May 1859, were probably the first of their rank to live in the Dolmabahçe Sarayı. Respectively, they were Sultan Abdülmecid's eighth and ninth men named to the position of Dârüssaâde Ağası. Following them was Hayreddin Ağa, who had been raised in the palace and rose to become the fifth-ranked Black Eunuch. He then obtained his promotion to Chief Black Eunuch, which took place in May 1859, and he remained in authority until January 1861. Hayreddin Ağa went to Medina for his exile and lived there several years until his death in 1873.¹⁷⁶

Raised around the staterooms and Ceremonial Hall areas of the Dolmabahçe Palace and rising to be a representative of the treasury, Visaleddin Ağa became Chief Black Eunuch in January 1861. He was the last to hold that position under Sultan Abdülmecid I, remaining for

about six months until the installation of the new sultan. He continued to live in the Harem neighbourhood and died in 1888–1889.¹⁷⁷

Sultan Abdül Aziz I (1861–1876) was a large man who overindulged in any way possible. The Ottoman Empire was now both morally and financially bankrupt. He had an oversized bed built not only to accommodate him but also some of his concubines. He had 900 of them plus 3,000 African eunuchs guarding them. During his 1867 trip to Paris, newspapers reported that he ‘always traveled in a solid-gold coach with a retinue of concubines, and a trail of elephants led by Negro slaves chained in gold’. However, that story was fictitious as the sultan arrived in Paris in a frockcoat.

After the sultan returned home, he seemed to become even more deranged, leading to a coup attempt. As the revolutionaries stormed the palace, the first group they met in the throne room was a crowd of hysterical eunuchs. Leading them was ‘the grotesque figure of the Kızlar Ağası, a huge Nubian in a white nightshirt’, probably Cevher Ağa. Five days after he was overthrown, 4 June 1876, Abdül Aziz was found dead under mysterious circumstances. Although his death was supposedly by suicide, the suspicion still exists in many quarters that he was murdered. Following his demise, over 3,000 persons were dismissed from Dolmabahçe Palace, about a third of them women.¹⁷⁸

Two days after becoming sultan on 25 June 1861, Abdül Aziz I dismissed Visaledin Ağa as Dârüssaâde Ağası and appointed Talha Ağa to the post. Previous Dârüssaâde Ağası, Tayfur Ağa (1844–1850), raised Talha Ağa, who emerged to become the chief ağa to Valide Sultan Pertevniyal, the mother of Abdül Aziz I. A very moral person, Talha Ağa received his appointment as Chief Black Eunuch on 27 June 1861, serving until April 1875. He died on 31 March 1876, and was buried at the Sultan Mahmud II mausoleum, near the Column of Constantine (Çemberlitaş).¹⁷⁹

New Zealand’s *West Coast Times* reported the death of Talha Ağa in its 12 July 1876 edition. One article lampooned the extravagance of spending in the sultan’s palace while the people, including public employees, were living in misery and poverty. It further stated that residents of the palace cost the citizens £4 million a year, an astonishing amount for the time. Supposedly the deceased Chief Black Eunuch left a fortune of £240,000, all of which, according to law, went to the sultan.¹⁸⁰

Traveller Harry Harewood Leech was in Istanbul during December 1866 and wrote about his experiences. At this time the sultan was Abdül

Aziz I who was heading for the mosque to worship. Leech recorded all of the ceremony occurring around him and included the sultan, the eunuchs, the veiled women, the traffic, and focused somewhat on the Chief Black Eunuch. Leech noted 'the groups of veiled women, accompanied by their *dyennas* [doyennes] or eunuchs'. He excitedly wrote:

Add to the equestrian dandier their black servants, who run beside them or ahead of them, robed in flowing white shirts, with brilliant girdles, with scarlet fezzes on their heads, legs bare and shining like polished ebony, and balancing in their hands long silver-beaded staves of almond wood. Hear their quick, imperious cries of 'Ims-he'e, ims-he'e!' ('Make way! Begone!') and you will have one of the finest effects of the strange tableau I am painting for you.¹⁸¹

Leech saw the sultan arrive and beside him 'rode the kızlar-agassı' and the Chief White Eunuch, both splendidly dressed. The former he described as 'black as coal, his flat, flat features were hideous as a nightmare'. Others in the entourage, the "fantastic names" of whom he somehow learned, were those 'whose duties seem a farce to any but Orientals, who perform the smallest acts with a surprising and ridiculous pomp'.¹⁸²

Cevher Ağa was the second and last kızlar ağası who served Sultan Abdül Aziz I, functioning in that position for only about a month. He had served as head ağa for the sultan's mother and then became the sultan's companion and head eunuch for the sultan's mother when she became valide sultan. In September 1874, Cevher Ağa was appointed Imperial Treasurer and then, in May 1876, Dârüssaâde Ağası. The following month the new sultan, Murad V, appointed his own Kızlar Ağası, Süleyman Ağa (Lala). Although Cevher Ağa had a reputation as a prudent and dignified person, Murad V probably felt that an administrative change was necessary. Cevher Ağa died on 4 September 1887, and was buried near the Hippodrome, near the mausoleum of Sultan Mahmud II, as was Talha Ağa, his predecessor.¹⁸³

Murad V (1876) only reigned for about 90 days before his brother, Abdül Hamit II (1876–1909), deposed him. Murad languished in the Kafes of the Çırağan Sarayı (Çırağan Palace) with his concubines and children. He died there of diabetes on 29 August 1904, just two days

short of his 28th year of imprisonment. While confined he became quite cultured and had an excellent library. He also composed music, despite his psychological problems. Murad kept watch on his brother through his Chief Black Eunuch, Cevher Ağa or, the Baş Musahib, head of the sultan's pages:

The Baş Musahib would frequently come to inquire if there were any requests, but throughout all the years of confinement Murad V never asked his brother for anything. Once he declared, 'Let me ask my brother for anything that'll make him think I'm mad. He'd love that!', and asked to be sent a bird in a cage!¹⁸⁴

The even-tempered and virtuous Süleyman Ağa (Lala) served Sultan Murad V (30 May 1876–31 August 1876). He only technically served Sultan Abdülhamid II for, on that last day in August, the new ruler immediately fired him and named Nureddin Ağa to the post of Kızlar Ağası. During his reign as sultan, Abdül Hamit II (1876–1909) had eight Chief Black Eunuchs, and promoted two of them to viziers. They were equal in protocol only to the Grand Vizier, the prime minister, the hereditary viceroy of Egypt (the Khedive) and the prince of Bulgaria.¹⁸⁵

Nureddin Ağa was head of the sultan's inner apartments and was named Kızlar Ağası on 1 September 1876, the day after Süleyman Ağa's firing. He is buried near the Bostan ferry landing in Eyüp. His successor, Behrâm Ağa (Hafız), previously served as Ağa of the Palace and Imperial Treasurer. His promotion to Kızlar Ağası occurred in September 1880. He died in August 1887 and is buried in Nişantaşı.¹⁸⁶ The *New York Times* issue of 15 August 1887 reported his death on the front page with the comment that 'he virtually directed the state affairs of Turkey'.¹⁸⁷

The *Allegemeine Zeitung*, a German newspaper still being printed in Augsburg, devoted a column describing the ceremony that installed Behrâm Ağa as Chief Black Eunuch. The correspondent, reporting from Pera, said Ottoman newspapers gave long descriptions of the events and poets 'expect to gain something in return for their amazing adulation'. The reporter also wrote that the Kızlar Ağa's superiors were in attendance – the sultan, the Grand Vizier and the şeyhülislâm – but 'he, from his position, frequently exercises a more direct influence upon

the sultan, and so upon Turkish politics, than either of the other two eminent officials':¹⁸⁸

The Sultan sent across to his new official two symbols of office, a written document and a magnificent silver pastoral staff worked in relief, which is never handled by any but the Agas of the imperial harem. The new Head Eunuch solemnly kissed the parchment and the staff. The imperial 'hatt' was read, some prayers for the blessing of Islam upon the new pastor of the Sultan's women were said by the clergy, and then the new 'Aga of the Sublime House of Blessedness,' as the Sultan's 'hatt' calles him, was allowed to enter the harem and inspect his future dominion.¹⁸⁹

It is quite obvious that Behrâm Ağa (Hafız) had his critics as well, including Ibrahim al-Muwaylihi, as recorded in the book *Spies, Scandals, and Sultans*. According to al-Muwaylihi, a reporter for an Egyptian newspaper, Behrâm Ağa 'is the man who kept His Majesty the Sultan and the entire cabinet under his control during the recent Bulgarian problem'. In the middle of a cabinet meeting 'he yelled that there was no alternative but to declare war on Bulgaria'.¹⁹⁰ Ibrahim al-Muwaylihi seemed to not only report but also to negatively exaggerate the role and power of the Chief Black Eunuch and, at the same time, paint a negative image of Abdül Hamit II's rule for the Egyptians. Of the Chief Black Eunuch he stated, 'This is the man who interferes in every aspect of state business. Nothing major or minor can be initiated without him getting involved, and his opinion will always win the day in the long run. Through the enormous influence and authority he is able to exert, he manages to defeat all opposition.'¹⁹¹

An unnamed reporter for the 28 May 1882 issue of the *New York Times*, published when Behrâm Ağa was Chief Black Eunuch, wrote a negative account of him specifically and palace eunuchs generally. Conceding his 'power is almost absolute', and that he was the 'second man in the Empire', he also chastized insubordinate women with 'rods on the bare body' and disposed of incalcitrant ones. In any case, it appears that all of the 'information' is from second-hand sources. The reporter further wrote:

These black eunuchs are hideous, ungainly fellows, generally with short necks and long legs; they are very haughty and overbearing

in their demeanour, and when escorting their charges on excursions, slash about with their 'courbatch' or whip indiscriminately, to clear the way for the pets of the Padishah. They enjoy princely salaries, and the large fortunes amassed by them result mainly from baksheesh screwed out of the inmates of the harem.¹⁹²

Another writer about this time, Kesnin Bey, who appeared to have an agenda of specifically demeaning the Turks, described very negatively the Chief Black Eunuchs, claiming that they stood 'above the law, and if so minded, may fearlessly box a recalcitrant minister's ears'.¹⁹³ Although there might have been some incidents such as this, the anecdote does not ring true, but it probably impacted a lot of readers. Kesnin Bey did not appear to get close to the palace but still wrote of the Chief Black Eunuchs and reported, 'He goes by the pretty name of Europeanophagus or devourer of all that is European, and he poses as the rabid defender of Asiatic barbarism.'¹⁹⁴

Şerefeddin Ağa (Sharaf al-din Ağa) was Chief Black Eunuch for over a year, beginning in August 1887 and serving until September 1888. According to al-Muwaylihi, he was 'dismissed and banished to Jerusalem'.¹⁹⁵ An item in the *New York Times*, dated 12 October 1888, seemed to explain his short term in office. It appeared that in the Yildiz Palace, one eunuch shot another to death, which 'caused a great sensation'. The investigation over that incident brought to light conditions unknown to outside authorities. It seemed that the palace eunuchs were armed with revolvers, rifles plus other weapons. The public was surprised to learn that although the palace was guarded by hundreds of personnel, the sultan's personal attendants had secretly acquired weapons that they could use against each other. This was against the sultan's personal orders. As a result, the Chief Black Eunuch, one of the sultan's attendants and about a dozen others were exiled.¹⁹⁶

Succeeding Şerefeddin Ağa was Yâver Ağa, a palace official who was honest and loyal, and who rose to be the representative of the Saray Ağa, the lieutenant of the Chief White Eunuch. His appointment to Chief Black Eunuch occurred in 1890–91 and he served until his death on 15 January 1898. Although highly improbable, Yâver Ağa was supposedly over 100 years old when he died. His place of burial is the

Yahyâ Efendi türbe, which is located near the Yıldız Palace and named after a famous Muslim saint.¹⁹⁷

Again, it is al-Muwaylihi who provided a portrait of Yâver Ağa. Although biased to the point of laughter, he does confirm that Yâver Ağa was very old, over the age of 90. He also reported that the Chief Black Eunuch was frivolous, weak and lived 'in perpetual terror of intrigues that might carry him off to the Prophet's sanctuary in Arabia'. His fear of being implicated in any financial scandal caused him to tell everyone that 'all he requires are the clothes on his back; the rings on his fingers, and the rosaries in his hands which have been valued at thirty thousand pounds'.¹⁹⁸

Abdülğanı Ağa and Tayfur Ağa (Thakib) followed Yâver Ağa in office but there seems to be very little information about them. However, al-Muwaylihi did mention a eunuch with the name of Abdülğanı Ağa, one of a select group of three known as companions of the sultan. Whether that Abdülğanı Ağa was the same person who would become Chief Black Eunuch a couple years later or not, al-Muwaylihi provided some information about the Kızlar Ağa's religious beliefs. It seems that the latter was a member of, or had interest in, a Sufi order. Similar interests were noted in Chief Black Eunuchs at least as far back as Hacı Beşir Ağa.

The aforementioned eunuch companions belonged to 'one of the Sufi orders, such as the Shadhiliyya, the Fifa'iyya, or the Qadiriyya', according to al-Muwaylihi. Instead of speculating that they only had interest in Sufism, he emphatically declared that they were little more than impious. In a follow-up comment, he further stated that 'they follow the counsels of the shaykhs of these orders far more than they do the imams of the four schools of Islamic law'.¹⁹⁹ Quite possibly, Sufism played specific roles in the lives of some of the palace eunuchs.

Although Abdül Hamit's six previous Chief Black Eunuchs seemed to have died natural deaths, the seventh did not fare quite as well. The Macedonian 'Operation Army' of early 1909 began to round up 6,000 suspects accused of overthrowing the previous government and for other crimes. They imprisoned the palace eunuchs including Chief Black Eunuch Cevher Ağa. Accused of being a founder of the Mohammedan League that had mutinied against the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) in early April and because of violence uncovered within hidden cells in the Yıldız palace, he was publicly executed and hanged from a lamppost on the Galata Bridge. The Treasury became the beneficiary of

his fortune.²⁰⁰ There were also charges that palace eunuchs and servants were looting the palace in the midst of the confusion.

Among the imprisoned palace eunuchs was Nadir Ağa, whose life was in a precarious position. He probably would have been executed along with others, but managed to escape death. Nadir admitted that he was involved in the uprising and had bribed soldiers to mutiny. However, he showed where Abdül Hamit had concealed his valuables and thereby, saved his own life.²⁰¹

Essentially, the power of the Kızlar Ağası had begun to decline from the early nineteenth century through the fall of the empire. By the early twentieth century, the position became more ceremonial and had less standing than in previous times. Now the Kızlar Ağası began to 'supervise the dress of the women, making sure that it was appropriate, and to accompany them to their outings and oversee their itineraries, making certain that everything was conducted according to the rules; to prohibit merchants, workers, and fortune-tellers from entering the harem at will; to grant or deny permission to women visitors to enter the harem; to leave after midnight; to be on call in case something critical happened after hours'.²⁰²

Though their roles diminished, the eunuchs still had a lot of responsibility at that time. One historian attempted to denigrate them by saying that 'they were reduced to a vestigial, tittering remnant of harem attendants in the women's compartments of the palaces, pensioned off and reduced to tea-table chatter, growing older and their ranks no longer replenished'.²⁰³ It appears that several eunuchs maintained some of their contacts and a few managed to accompany some of the last members of the harem to Europe to live out their lives.

Some have wondered why the palace eunuchs did not move to emancipate themselves or, if emancipated, decided to remain within the palace system. Perhaps, their lives and livelihoods were so completely tied to the palace that there seemed to be no other options. Also, they had no family connections except for fictive kinship with other eunuchs and, sometimes, other members of the harem. Plus, those men had economic security that, if they were on the outside, would have ranked them as middle class or even upper-middle class. Would they have wanted to trade that to secure jobs and housing?²⁰⁴

The CUP, dubbed the Young Turks, plotted the overthrow of Sultan Abdül Hamit II (Abdülhamid) following his dissolution of parliament

and political repression. Thirty-two years of despotic rule ended on 27 April 1909, as the CUP, who dominated the parliament, deposed the sultan. Now he begged permission to live and in the same dilapidated palace that once held his brother Murad V. However, the government exiled him to a villa in Salonica, now known as the Greek port city of Thessaloniki. He was able to take part of his household and a few slaves:

Abdül Hamit II lived in Yıldız Palace on a hill overlooking the Bosphorus. After him came two more sultans, but figureheads, for the Young Turks had taken power. The last sultan of the Osmanlı dynasty, Mehmed VI, left Istanbul on a British warship on November 12, 1922 to spend his remaining years in exile. He became the last sultan and the fourteenth out of a total of thirty-six to be deposed. The old Anatolian nucleus of the Ottoman Empire, plus Istanbul and a small strip of Thrace, had become the Republic of Turkey.²⁰⁵

Journalist Francis McCullagh, who was in Istanbul during that time, reported that Cevher Ağa was executed while wearing a black coat, while the others executed wore white ones. McCullagh wrote that eunuchs were either slim or 'one mass of bloated flesh'. Cevher was 'a huge, swollen, balloon-like man of extraordinary stature'. His death and how it affected another condemned man deserves repeating:

Owing to vindictiveness (for in Stamboul, the arrogance and cruelty of the Palace eunuchs towards the lower orders is proverbial), or to inexperience, the gypsy executioner bungled his work by getting the rope round the chin and the nape of the neck, so that the man was killed, not by strangulation but by dislocation of the vertebrae, with the result that the unnaturally prolonged and slender neck offered, after death, a horrible contrast to the corpulent trunk [...]

The next man to be hanged was so affected by the sight of Cevher Ağa's body that he offered to hang himself. The executioner readily consented, whereupon the condemned man did the work with calmness and a dexterity which seemed to indicate considerable practice.²⁰⁶

After Abdül Hamit II's deposition, it took a week to remove all of the women and children from their residence at Yıldız Palace. They were sent to the Topkapı Palace where unwanted harem women lived after the construction of the Dolmabahçe Palace for the sultan's residence. Each day at least 46 carriages loaded with their personal possessions left the residences.²⁰⁷ The number of servants and dependents were as follows:

(1) Chamberlains, secretaries, bodyguards and aides-de-camps	350
(2) Women and slaves	370
(3) Sons and daughters of the sultan and their respective suites	160
(4) Eunuchs of the harem	127
(5) Personnel of the kitchen	390
(6) Personnel of the stables	350
(7) Doorkeepers and other servants	250
(8) Troops of the palace guard	1,450

Total **3,447 persons**²⁰⁸

The CUP did not demand that Sultan Reşad [Mehmed VI], the successor of Abdül Hamit, or other members of the Ottoman dynasty, emancipate their own slaves. Therefore, it is difficult to consider this episode as other than an act of retribution against the ex-Sultan, skillfully used by the Young Turks to stress their anti-slavery stance.²⁰⁹

The Young Turk manifesto, written in 1900, spoke of the 'parasites' in the Imperial Palace that should be done away with and that people appointed along the lines of advisors in Europeans palaces should replace them. The Young Turks believed that the use of eunuchs in the court of the sultan was 'backward, uncivilised and un-European'. Lûfti Simavi, the CUP-appointed Lord Chamberlain to the new sultan and Halid Aiyâ, the Chief Secretary to the Sultan, planned the degradation of the Kızlar Ağası via public execution. The Kızlar Ağası was the third highest ranked man in the empire and, upon the ascension of the new Kızlar Ağası, the Young Turks acted:

Fahreddin Ağâ, the Chief Musahib [companion or, gentleman-in-waiting] of Mehmed V, became the Chief Black Eunuch with the

sultan's accession the throne. On 20 May 1909, he was stripped of his title, *devletlî* (His Highness), and barred from participating in state ceremonies. It was 'symbolic of the affairs in the "Young Empire" that the Lord Chamberlain on two successive occasions had to tell Fahreddin Ağa to leave the Hall of Ceremonies when he turned out pathetically dressed in his grand uniform and tried to participate in ceremonies held there to celebrate Muslim religious festivals.'²¹⁰

English woman Grace Ellison made a return visit to Turkey in 1913, noting changes since the constitution of 1908. She and her friend whose name she changed to Fatima in her journal for anonymity received an invitation to the Dolmabahçe Palace for a reception. When the carriage pulled up to the door of the harem, eunuchs helped them out and escorted them inside. Ellison expressed some surprise at seeing them because of the new governing laws:

I was told that eunuchs were now a thing of the past, but certainly that remark could not have been made with reference to the Imperial harem. It is difficult for me, however, to remember that these poor mutilated anachronisms are great personages at the Ottoman Court, who, although they perform the menial service of opening the carriage doors and helping us up the stairs (one on either side and one behind, as though we were old ladies), are yet the masters of the establishment.²¹¹

The vote by National Assembly on 1 November 1922 separated the caliphate from the sultanate. Turkey was declared a republic on 29 October 1923 and, on 3 March 1924, Kemal Atatürk (Mustafa Kemal, 1880–1938) abolished the caliphate. The Ottoman Empire was already defunct when the founder and first president of the Turkish Republic, a secular state, rose to power. The government then banished the Ottoman house from Turkey. From the Bucharest treaty of 1812 to the Lausanne treaty of 1923, the Ottoman Empire was reduced to Anatolia and only a small European part of eastern Rumelia across the Bosphorus.

CHAPTER 7

RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE KIZLAR AĞA

The Kızlar Ağası also performed immensely important religious tasks. As supervisors of the holy places, they built and rebuilt mosques in Istanbul and elsewhere, many still in use. Under the reign of Süleyman I (1520–1566), for instance, Karabaş Mustafa founded one that lay in ruins for years until its restoration in 1962.¹ Located in the Tophane district across from the Tophane cannon foundry that Mehmed the Conqueror established, today it goes almost unnoticed.

Mehmed Ağa, Chief Black Eunuch during the reign of Murad III (1574–1595), founded the Mehmed Ağa Camii (mosque). It was he who wrested the vast powers away from the Chief White Eunuchs. The mosque is of architectural interest because the architect was Davut Ağa, who succeeded architect Mimar Sinan as Chief Architect to the Sultan. Mehmed Ağa's türbe (tomb) is in an outside garden. Near the mosque is a double-bath, for women and men that Davut Ağa most likely designed. Inside each section are small private washrooms, separated by marble partitions.²

Beşir Ağa, Kızlar Ağası during the reign of Mahmud I (1730–1754) built a mosque near Istanbul's first hill in 1745. Known as the Beşir Ağa Camii, the complex includes a library, a college (medrese) and a dervish monastery (tekke). There is a second Beşir Ağa mosque on the grounds of the Topkapı Sarayı as one goes through the Gate of the Dead and down the hill.³

Although a Chief Black Eunuch did not build the following mosque, he played an important part in its existence. On the seventh hill, Selçuk

Hatun (Princess Selçuk) founded a mosque. The daughter of Sultan Mehmed I (1413–1421) and an aunt of Mehmed the Conqueror (1451–1481), she died in 1485. After a fire damaged the building in the seventeenth century, Chief Black Eunuch Abbas Ağa restored it. In 1956, the mosque was demolished and reconstructed on its present spot.⁴

The Chief Black Eunuch was also entrusted with one of the few venerated relics of Mohammed the Prophet, the Sancak Şerif or, the Sacred Standard. Located today in the Topkapı Sarayı's Pavilion of the Holy Mantle, the Sacred Standard lies wrapped within a rosewood coffer along with another one said to have belonged to Omar, one of the 'four companions'. After Selim I began to conquer Arab lands from 1512 to 1520, including the capture of Cairo in 1517, the sultans became Caliphs of Islam and the protectors of Mecca and Medina and the Topkapı Sarayı became the repository for the relics of Mohammed the Prophet. The title of Caliph made Selim and his descendants the spiritual leaders of Islam who could legislate areas not covered by canon law such as private behaviour and individual relationships. Selim had the standard lead the procession of pilgrims on their annual hajj to Mecca. Murad III used it to spur on his troops when attacking Hungary. A symbol of Ottoman domination, the public only saw it very few times. Those occasions included periods when either the sultan or Grand Vizier was in the military field, in national emergencies such as in 1826 (the massacre of the rebelling Janissaries) or during a declaration of war such as the holy war against the allies in 1915. The person designated to hold the keys to the coffer was the Kızlar Ağası because of his position as administrator and inspector of the Holy Cities.⁵

The Kızlar Ağası administered the properties and estates of the valide sultan plus that of the sultan's children and could generate a generous personal income from that position. The post that made him very wealthy and that made him an extremely important religious patron began in 1595. From his appointment in 1574, Chief Black Eunuch Mehmed Ağa began to siphon away the power of Chief White Eunuch. It was not until 1588 that the Chief Black Eunuch received the right to 'administer the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina and its vast resources, the post formerly held by the Chief White Eunuch'.⁶

Cairo's *Al-Abram Weekly* published a story about the al-Malika Safiyya mosque built there in 1610 by Uthman/Osman Ağa, Kızlar Ağası for Mehmed III (1595–1603). Mehmed's grandmother, the

former valide sultan, was Safiyya, the Venetian slave of the Baffo family. This story is not only about the wealth of the retired Chief Black Eunuchs but also about inheritance. After retiring to Cairo, Uthman Ağa built the beautiful mosque in 1601 and endowed several villages to pay for its upkeep. The building originally had its own gardens as well. The former Kızlar Ağası died before the completion of the building in April 1610 but, after hearing about the beauty of the mosque, Safiyya went to court to appropriate it as her own. By that time she was no longer valide sultan because her grandson Ahmed I was sultan.

Because Safiyya had freed Uthman from prison where her mother-in-law Nur Banu sent him, she claimed that he had begun working on the mosque before his freedom, therefore acting as her agent. Further, she informed the judge that, in any case, Uthman was her slave. Thus, according to Islamic law, she should inherit all his property after he died, including the vakıf. The judge agreed and awarded Safiyya the mosque, now named the al-Malika Safiyya Mosque.

Safiyya then named Uthman Ağa's successor as her new agent for and guardian of the mosque. She also provided daily funds to pay for 'a Hanafi jurist, two imams, four maudhenin, readers, lamplighters, cleaners, gardeners, wateriers and a handyman'. The mosque is one of only a handful of buildings in Cairo that has the name of a woman on it. More importantly, the tale clearly demonstrates the lack of inheritance rights the retired Chief Black Eunuchs had under Islamic law.⁷

To her credit, Safiyya vastly increased the salaries and operating expenses of the mosque as well as the number of employees and positions. She also increased the support to those categories not associated with the Cairo mosque. Whereas Uthman Ağa created a vakıf with no personal gain, Safiyya built in a monthly salary for the new supervisor. She also stipulated that the position's successors would be the Chief Black Eunuch.⁸ She wrote in her deed of trust, 'Let the foundation be free of distress under the oversight of the chief black eunuch of the palace.'⁹

What the saga of Uthman/Osman Ağa reveals is that he was the supervisor (nazır) of a pious endowment called a vakıf, which was a religious and a legal private foundation that produced revenues. The nazır was supposed to assure that revenues from the awqaf were distributed as the founder had mandated. With that authority, he managed clients and revenues from all over the Ottoman Empire that

were supposed to service the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, and built mosques and the accompanying medrese. He controlled the revenues from agricultural lands, leases, rents, and commercial businesses as part of his position:

These bequests had to consist of an outright permanent gift, made either during a man's lifetime or after his death, of land or shops or some kind of immovable property which could be depended upon to bring in some permanent revenue. Money or jewels were unacceptable as being inconsistent with the immovable perpetual nature of a waqf bequest. Once the gift was made it was irrevocable and no further transfer of ownership of the property was possible, although occasionally if a large sum of money were urgently needed for the repair or improvement of the building endowed, it was possible, with the permission of the *cadi*, to let the waqf land out on permanent lease in exchange for the necessary sum paid as rent in advance. If the lessee died without heirs the property reverted to the waqf.¹⁰

In the Ottoman Empire, private funds built public works and public services. Those pious foundations in the form of public charities paid for fountains, bridges, mosques, markets, inns, roads, medreses, bridges, etc. A local *kadı* (Islamic judge) had the authority for the foundations' administration and registered the deeds. Each deed had specified the purpose of the foundation and outlined the procedures and restrictions. Many times the sultans would grant the foundations state-owned lands. Those close to him such as palace dwellers or political appointees might persuade the sultan to establish pious foundations with them or someone related to them as trustee, ensuring that they would have a never-ending income for themselves and their families.

The Chief Black Eunuchs performed both intimate and vital functions for the sultans. Because of their access, they were able to attain powers exceeded only by the viziers. By the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the power of the Chief Black Eunuch rivaled that of the viziers. When the sultan appointed the *Kızlar Ağası* to his position, he assigned him administration of the public vakıf. At first the Chief Black Eunuch shared the administration of the awqaf of Mecca and Medina (*al-haramayn* or *Haremeyn-i Serifeyn*) but, by the

eighteenth century, became responsible for 500 mosques plus all four of the imperial awqaf for the two sacred cities. As outlined by Hathaway, the four main awqaf were:

- (1) The Dashışat al-kubra, established under the Mamluk sultanates.
- (2) The Mehmediye, founded by Sultan Mehmed IV.
- (3) The Muradiye, founded by Sultan Murad III.
- (4) The Hasekiye, founded by Hürrem Sultan, wife of Sultan Süleyman I.¹¹

Since Egypt generated the income for the four haramayn awqaf, 'they became the main channel for the acting Kızlar Ağası's influence in Egypt.' Adding to his functions, after 1593 the Chief Black Eunuch, while in Egypt, became the administrator of the awqaf of the Mamluk and Ottoman sultans there, plus appointed an administrator for each one. The Mamluk emirs were finally able to gain control of the latter awqaf after 1670.¹² According to Hathaway's estimate, during a 150-year period, 17 of 38 Chief Black Eunuchs who were banished to Egypt received a handsome compensation for administration.¹³

When the sultans retired the Chief Black Eunuchs to Egypt to become directors of the awqaf, they received salaries and pensions for their work called *azatlık*, which supported their retirement. Egyptian soldiers were jealous of the retired eunuchs because of their income and their connections to the sultans. It was a slightly ironic situation because Egypt had introduced most of the eunuchs to the Ottoman Empire and sent most of them to the sultans' households. When the sultans appointed them to Egypt, in a sense they were returning 'home'.¹⁴

Another ironic aspect is that African slaves arrived in Cairo for the slave markets, some of whom were eunuchs. A number of them served in the households of the political elites (*ayan*) before being gifted to the Ottoman sultans.¹⁵ They not only established early relationships with Egypt but also if fortunate, had some opportunity to become acquainted with the retired Chief Black Eunuch or his subordinates. It is likely that some of those eunuchs, before entering service to the sultan, had already made important connections.

Eunuchs who served the sultan favourably, plus those who learned Turkish and who converted to Islam, could progress in the system. A few would procure appointment to administrative posts within the empire,

some serving in Cairo and Medina. The sultan would recall some of them to Istanbul where a small number could receive a promotion to the high position of Kızlar Ağası. Some of the top eunuchs received a stipend from Egypt's budget, which is why the Chief Black Eunuch and other palace eunuchs were exiled or retired to Cairo. They lived in fashionable housing and formed close relationships with Mamluk authorities.¹⁶

The vakıf was also one way that a donor could sometimes escape the payment of hereditary taxes and avoid the confiscation of property. The vakıf provided the means that supported the religious establishment throughout the Ottoman Empire, which included Egypt. Because of those pious foundations, 'almost no building was erected in Ottoman Cairo without the involvement of a vakıf estate because virtually all of Cairo's land and buildings had already been made vakıf by the end of the Mamluk period':

A considerable number of houses of Istanbul and other major cities financed such institutions with their rent revenues. From the first quarter of the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century the volume of the waqf revenues grew in proportion to the state revenue from 16 percent to 1/3. By the nineteenth century between 2/3 and 3/4 of the land of the empire was placed in waqf.¹⁷

One of the reasons that Sultan Selim I invaded Egypt was because of the corruption surrounding vakıf property and estates. An administrator would exchange a low yield vakıf estate for one with higher returns, a prohibited action. Three weeks after his victory over Egypt, Selim ordered a review of all awqaf and appointed a supervisor for Egyptian awqaf. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Black eunuchs controlled the royal awqaf of the harem and of the sultan's family.¹⁸

All awqaf of individuals and the royal family had to be certified by witnesses in front of a judge, with a copy of the trust deed deposited in the office of the treasurer. Each vakıf could have a supervisor and had to follow religious laws. Properties in the imperial awqaf generated revenues but they were not taxable while other awqaf were. Since the Chief Eunuchs were slaves of the sultans, the sultans directly controlled the royal awqaf.

The imperial awqaf, according to historian Kayhan Orbay, were not completely independent from the central administration. Annual

account ledgers assured that the imperial awqaf and the hundreds of other awqaf had funds forwarded to the two holy places of Mecca and Medina. Two central offices called the Two Holy Places Accountancy and the Two Holy Places Tax Farms had the responsibility for assuring that the funds reached the designated recipients. In 1691, those revenues accounted for 5 per cent of the central budget (45 million akça) but the following year declined to about 3 per cent. However, the revenues also supported the Outer Treasury and associated military expenditures.

Annual budget surpluses went to the treasury of the Chief Black Eunuch's office (4 million akça in 1670). The Chief Black Eunuchs forwarded a large part of those funds to supplement costs incurred by the Outer Treasury and, if necessary, the Inner Treasury, the latter being the sultans' private treasury. The Chief Black Eunuchs also supervised and inspected awqaf located in Anatolia and Rumeli (Ottoman Balkans) provinces. One particular year the monthly salaries of those awqaf amounted to 3,352,382 akça but the central administration would receive almost 20 million akça. At that critical time in Ottoman late seventeenth-century history, the central administration had devised a way to legally appropriate revenues from the awqaf to support military campaigns and expenditures associated with costs of a standing army. Military defeats, particularly after that at Vienna in 1683, caused large budget deficits and loss of territory. It is obvious that the Chief Black Eunuch was a key person in Ottoman central administration during the late seventeenth century, since he was essential to this redistribution of funds.¹⁹

One might have a better understanding of the wealth and power when examining the inventory of Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab of the late 1700s. He was not a Kızlar Ağası but, as many rich people did, he established his own vakıf. Information about the expansiveness of his vakıf is very complete and will provide a better context to understand this type of foundation. The Kızlar Ağası, though, had additional responsibilities and therefore, larger awqaf.

The state treasury, which kept vakıf records, had three departments out of 33 that only dealt with those trusts. The Bureau of Accounts of the Holy Cities kept the records of awqaf 'of the imperial mosques and of other religious endowments in Istanbul and elsewhere in Rumelia, and of all the properties dedicated to Holy Cities'. The Bureau of the Leases of the Holy Cities kept 'the records of all awqaf of the Anatolian

provinces [...]'. The Lesser Bureau of Accounts of Religious Endowments' kept the accounts 'of all pensioners and attendants of the endowed hospitals, soup-kitchens, and the like'.²⁰ The nature of many awqaf meant that the Kızlar Ağası (and formerly, the Kapı Ağası) had to understand intimately the operations of three different departments if he were to be effective.

Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab used his wealth to control the revenues of various agricultural lands and businesses to endow a mosque in Cairo, Egypt. His vakıf described the mosque's functions, the personnel to run it, the stipends for the teachers and the students, the reciters of the Qur'an, and others. In this instance, there were at least 200 people to support in the medrese (Muslim college) alone, plus almost 40 more who were associated with conducting services. The personnel were entitled to 30 days off with pay to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina plus another 30 days off to visit family. It also stipulated the source of the revenues to pay for those expenses.

A typical külliye (mosque complex) would contain the mosque itself (cami), an ablutions fountain, a medrese (religious school of higher learning), a bath house, a mausoleum for the founder, a hospital, a caravanserai or han (inn for travellers), a library, a primary school, fountains, study halls and a public kitchen to feed not only the officials and students but also the sick and the neighbourhood poor.²¹ There also had to be funds to plan, buy land, build, furnish and to refurbish the structures and the contents throughout time.

The motive behind believers wanting to establish mosques was that they assumed that it was an act most pleasing to God. A description of one vakıf in a Cairo document proclaimed that it was 'a legal, true and everlasting vakıf, an unambiguous, binding and everlasting vakıf, dedicated and confirmed with cessation to the end of time, a charitable gift extending to eternity and continuing everlastingly'. It further threatened that if anyone changed the provisions of the vakıf, defrauded, or appropriated the properties or revenues, that person would burn in hell. Many times those threats did not hold off those who desired to acquire the properties or business that were part of the vakıf. In the case of Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab, the endowed property was gone within a century.²² Uthman Ağa's story, by comparison, is much more positive. Though another person legally acquired the mosque he built and endowed, today it is still well preserved.

There are at least two mosques, one a remnant, still standing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Dârüssaâde Ağa built. The Commission to Preserve National Monuments met in Sipovo and Mrkonjic Grad municipalities during 2004 with the charge of protecting cultural heritage sites. The commissioners discussed the kızlar ağa mosques in Rijeka and in the Mrkonjic Grad Municipality. The area around the mosque in the latter municipality became a parking lot but was then fenced to protect it from further destruction.²³ Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa commissioned the mosque, built between 1591 and 1595, and there was a vakıf registered in Istanbul during February 1595. There is other detailed information on the site and about Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa's endowment:

He built and endowed several buildings in Gornja Kloka [old name of Mrkonjic Grad]: a mosque, a mekteb, a caravanserai with 20 rooms, 24 shops, a water main and a number of manuscript books; all these are listed in his vakufnama [deed of endowment]:²⁴

To maintain the buildings and to pay the vakıf officials, Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa endowed 647,000 akças in cash, 'of which 59,040 were to be spent on salaries, and 615,060 to be in circulation, with a 10 per cent profit, this to be used for covering routine maintenance costs'. There are two five-foot tall identical candleholders in the mosque and on the copper portions, the following inscription not only praises the largess of the Dârüssaâde Ağa, but also warns anyone who would remove the candlesticks from the mosque:

May it be clear to the enlightened hearts of those who submit to God that this şamadan was endowed by the aga of the imperial court hajji Mustafa aga, who built a mosque in Novo Jajce – may the light of his heart shine for ever and may the foundation of his greatness endure for eternity – for the love of Allah who gives light to all, seeking to please the Lord Who governs all things and who is omnipotent, and issued this decree: To those who remove it from this mosque and display stubborn resistance to the vakıf's decree, may all the misfortunes of this world fall upon their heads.²⁵

Regarding slave-owners who married slaves, the vakıf is one place that they appear. With that union, the former slave became a free person. If a wealthy person had no heirs, he or she might make the descendants of that former slave the administrators of the vakıf. In addition, a vakıf might stipulate that servants or slaves should receive a house in which to live out their days.²⁶

One can now appreciate that an endeavour such as this would require immense wealth. While still Kızlar Ağası in Istanbul, that person accumulated enough resources to build and maintain mosques in that city and in other areas of the Ottoman Empire. After his retirement or exile to Egypt, he built or rehabilitated mosques there and was also serviced the mosques of Mecca and Medina, plus he held the title of Chief Guardian of the Prophet's tomb. Any surplus funds became the property of the Kızlar Ağası. Not only was the immense wealth and power of the Kızlar Ağası almost incomprehensible before and after retirement, but also the man was still a slave of the sultan.

Abbas Ağa was a very wealthy retired Kızlar Ağası who left 27 properties upon his death. He had been advisor to the valide sultan before his tenure as Chief Black Eunuch, building up his wealth ahead of time. He also constructed mosques and Turkish baths. Professor Jane Hathaway has published a very detailed and scholarly paper on Abbas Ağa's vakıf inventory. The wealthy established foundations of property and money that provided revenues so that said foundations could build and maintain holy places as well as provide services. All surplus revenues went to the vakıf supervisors for their personal use.

A document in the Topkapı Palace archives (#7657) is the inventory of his vakıf that also comprised his personal properties that included his house, stipend and allotment of grain. Unlike Uthman Ağa, Abbas Ağa knew that the sultan could claim his personal property upon his death. By placing those assets in the vakıf, he could avoid that predicament.

Hathaway listed the 29 properties. The first few items are of little consequence but the residential properties are substantial. The commercial properties serve two important undertakings – the production of both linen and coffee. Abbas Ağa owned a business that processed flax before shipping it for weaving into linen. At a second location, the linen was woven, dyed and sold. Essentially, Abbas Ağa built a flourishing and essential market in which he was an important player.

He built a coffee complex at which the beans were taken, stored, ground and sold and included a coffeehouse where customers could consume the beverage. He built the facility in an area where coffee boats probably stopped as they were going to the main ports:

The money was administered by a completely autonomous office, independent of the Treasury and headed in an honorary capacity by the Chief Eunuch. This office appointed to each vakıf an administrator – a member of the family, if this was designated by the donor – who was responsible for the collection of revenues, and a supervisor, usually a government servant or religious dignitary, who saw to it that the terms of the bequest were properly fulfilled. Often, as for example in the case of the endowment of a hospital, many people were needed for adequate implementation of the bequest, and the office appointed as many as were necessary, from the Chief Surgeon down to the man with a mop and bucket who washed the graffiti off the wall, and the pay of each employee was stipulated, down to the last lamp-trimmer and lavatory attendant. Sometimes, however, the appointments were a mere sinecure, and if the endowment had been generous the administrators themselves became extremely wealthy.²⁷

Abbas Ağa was required by Egypt's rulers to support a military campaign against Bedouins from his own funds in 1691. He also sent ten of his own Mamluks to fight, 'which is a clear indication that the Aghas had their own atba' and Mamluks'. Apparently, that did not sit well with the sultan, who issued an edict in 1693 stating that because of services to the sultan, Abbas and his fellow eunuchs should not have to share related costs any longer. They enjoyed the protection of sultans as long as the latter deemed them loyal and useful.²⁸

There were former Chief Black Eunuchs who, for some reason, angered the Porte, causing all of their properties to be confiscated. That happened to Yusuf Ağa, Ali Ağa (Hazinedar), Nazir Ağa, İsmail Ağa, an unnamed Kızlar Ağa and after death, the aforementioned Abbas Ağa.

A person could create a vakıf for an abundance of services and even non-Muslims could endow one if it did not conflict with Islam. For example, a non-Muslim could endow an orphanage but not a mosque. To avoid taxes some people were able to build a family trust into the

vakıf charity so that their heirs could receive the balance of the revenues. A person might establish a vakıf to build and provide for mosques and medreses as well as for 'libraries, schools, hamams and hospitals, hospices and soup kitchens and laundries, bridges and fountains, there were dowries for orphan girls, repayment of debt on behalf of debtors in prison, burial of the indigent, clothes for the aged, rice for birds and picnics for schoolchildren in the spring, as well as aid to soldiers and their families, and the construction and maintenance of forts and ships used in the defence of the Domain of Islam'.²⁹

The changing standards for admittance into the Janissaries also meant that their power expanded in some areas. With them no longer electing to remain celibate and starting families, they deemed it necessary to establish religious foundations for their relatives. In Egypt, regimental officers were becoming tax farmers, passing awqaf to regimental commanders. By the eighteenth century, what had once been the domain of the Black eunuchs was transferred almost exclusively to others.³⁰ Perhaps, that occurred because of fraud within the system:

'Corruption' in waqf administration was rife at all levels. All kinds of subterfuges were employed in extracting benefit, and in some cases in the conversion of a waqf into private property for the overseer. The cooperation of a qadi was needed in these. Religious and charitable endowments in a city or a province also constituted means of building up bases of local power and influence for aspirants to political or religious office and local notability. A qadi, mufti or tax-farmer, through endowing mosques, soup kitchens and charities, could build up networks of patronage and influence.³¹

Building and maintaining public fountains were ways the Ottomans, including the Kızlar Ağa, could simultaneously serve religious and secular spheres. The Ottomans, starting with Mehmed II, knew the importance of establishing a viable water system. Other sultans following his reign committed resources to that end as well. Not only was the building of fountains an act of piety, it was also a way that whole neighbourhoods could be served. Kızlar Ağası, sultans and many other people built fountains as part of their social and religious service. Some built fountains near mosques so that Muslims could perform the ritual

cleansing, or they might have built them so that travellers could have access to potable water.

During the sixteenth century, it was the ruling elite of Grand Viziers, viziers and Grand Admirals who built many of the public fountains. During the seventeenth century, the patrons began to be high-ranking military personnel and the palace ağalar. By the eighteenth century, lower-ranked military personnel and the ağalar built about a third of the public fountains. As the Chief Black Eunuchs captured more political power and influence, so did their patronage.³²

There are at least 17 extant fountains in Istanbul built in memory of the Kızlar Ağalar, consisting of four main types:

- (1) Wall fountains were built into a wall with a storage tank behind the wall. They might have from one to three side-by-side faces.
- (2) Corner fountains were on street corners and might have one to three sides.
- (3) Column fountains were in the form of a single column placed in urban squares.
- (4) Fountains with sebils were parts of kiosks where a person could receive water, fruit drinks and fruit juices.³³

CHAPTER 8

PERSONAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CHIEF BLACK EUNUCHS

Europeans travelling to Turkey and other Muslim centres reported experiences that they deemed exotic, including observations of harems and the eunuchs. Sir Richard Burton managed to disguise himself as 'Hajj 'Abd Allah' and make the nineteenth-century pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina. Like many European travellers, Burton found deference to honoured eunuchs, particularly African eunuchs, disturbing. Burton, as well as others, found the eunuchs to be not only non-men, but also *Black* non-men. He described one exalted one as 'a grotesque and ridiculous creature'. He also said that, 'Disconnected with humanity, he is cruel, fierce, brave, and capable of any villainy.'¹ The jarring experience of seeing African people in high positions may be one reason that many Europeans derided powerful eunuchs or poked fun at their physical appearances.

There seems to be scant information on some of the earlier Chief Black Eunuchs. For instance, Osman Ağa was the chief ağa to Safiyya, the valide sultan and mother of Mehmed III. Following in the footsteps of Beyazî Mustafa Ağa, he became Chief Black Eunuch in 1595–1596 but was murdered in 1602–1603. It was under Murad III that the Chief Black Eunuch became the most powerful person of the Inner Service, also known as the Court of the Divan or, Court of the Council of State.² Süleyman Ağa became Chief Black Eunuch in 1620 after serving as apprentice to the previous one, Hacı Mustafa Ağa, who retired. Süleyman died only two years later and is buried at a small mosque that bears his name.³ Bilâl Ağa was an outstanding Kızlar Ağası under

Selim III. After the enthronement of the latter, Bilâl became a government treasury minister. He followed İdris Ağa as Chief Black Eunuch in 1789–1790, succumbing to the illness in 1791–1792 that finally limited his ability to perform his duties.⁴

Sometimes employees of a Chief Black Eunuch or relatives of those employees also attained high positions. Razi Abdullatif Efendi was the son of Chief Black Eunuch Yusuf Ağa's (1671–1672) secretary. He became a teacher, a military judge, a mullah or chief judge and a famous poet. In 1733–1734, he rose to become an official of Istanbul, but died the same year.⁵ Yusuf Ağa owned a eunuch slave named Silahdar Abaza Süleyman Paşa, whom he emancipated. Süleyman then became responsible for lighting and extinguishing candles in the Enderun, the inner area of the imperial palace. He probably received an education while serving the sultan because he rose to become a palace steward and in 1704, a military steward. He was governor of Cyprus, retiring from that position in 1707 to become the governor of Anatolia. He further became sadaret kaymakamı, the person who represented the Grand Vizier when he went to war with the military. In 1712, he became Grand Vizier under Sultan Ahmed III, who presided over the aesthetic and pleasure-driven Tulip Period. Silahdar Abaza Süleyman Paşa retired from that position in 1713 and died in 1715 at age 50.⁶ Arif Mehmed Efendi (nicknamed Ulu) relocated from the southern Black Sea city of Kastamonu to Istanbul to begin work for Mehmed Paşa Ahmed Bey. He took Persian lessons and became an intern for the secretary of Chief Black Eunuch İdris Ağa (1783), later receiving a promotion to secretary and becoming very successful in business.⁷

Jean-Louise Burckhardt, another European traveller who also disguised himself to enter the Holy Cities earlier than Burton in 1811, recorded the interactions between a powerful man and a Black eunuch. Umar Tusun Paşa, the son of Egypt's ruler Muhammad Ali, kissed the hand of the chief eunuch of Medina. The nobleman explained to Burckhardt that the important eunuch had been the Kızlar Ağası of the Ottoman court. Still, Burckhardt seems confused regarding why a high nobleman was kissing the hand of the eunuch, although the latter was the chief guardian of the Prophet's tomb. Apparently, only the sultan's best eunuchs attained such high posts:

The present Sheik el haram [head of the eunuchs of the Prophet] had been formerly Kızlar Agassi, or prefect of the women of the

Emperor Selym [Selim], which is one of the first charges of the court. Whether it was the dignity of his former employ, of which the eastern grandees usually retain the rank through life, even if they are dispossessed of it, or his new dignity of Sheik el haram, that gave him his importance, I am unable to say; but he took, on every occasion, precedence of Tusun Paşa, whose rank was that of Paşa of Djedda [Mecca port of Jidda], and of three [peacock] tails; and the latter, whenever they met, kissed the Sheik's hands, which I have seen him do in the mosque.⁸

In the book *Histoire de L'Empire Ottoman* by J. von Hammer-Purgstall, the author has a chapter titled 'Feast of the Prophet's Birthday in the Imperial Mosque'. He began with a description of all the officials gathered for the celebration and included observations on the Kızlar Ağası. On that occasion, Mahmud II was sultan. He said that it was 'the only feast-day on which the Kısar Aga [guardian of the harem] (excluded from every other feast) appeared himself in all his pomp'. He added, the Chief Black Eunuch 'as we all know, was omnipotent'. As von Hammer-Purgstall further noted, he left the palace a half an hour before the others to arrive at Sultan Ahmed Mosque (Blue Mosque) with his retinue that included the other eunuchs and his bodyguards. The sultan, the Grand Vizier, the Mufti, the viziers and other high officials followed and seated themselves on cushions.

After praises to the Prophet and anthems sung by choirs, there are desserts and then the presentation of a letter to the sultan from the Sharif of Mecca in response to the one the sultan sent to him with his annual gift. The person entrusted with the letter was the one who bore the news that the caravan had returned safely to Istanbul. An elaborate procedure followed involving handing that letter from the messenger to the sultan:

He hands over (in a green satin sachet) the letter to the Grand Vizier, who hands it to the Reis; and the latter, accompanied by the Marshal of the Court and the caravan messenger, approaches the Sultan's tribunal. The Kısar Aga then takes the letter and hands it to the Sultan, who returns it to him and in turn he hands it finally to the Reis Efendi for it to be lodged in the Imperial Archives. The Kısar Aga then robes himself with a sable cloak of honour, and the

three singers receive kaftans of honour. A short prayer ends the ceremony.⁹

The sultan then returned to the palace unescorted and about 15 minutes later the Janissary Ağa preceded the Kızlar Ağası, walking 50 paces ahead. It is here that von Hammer-Purgstall informed the reader as to why the person and the function of the Kızlar Ağası were so important. Further, he demonstrated his own depth of understanding of the centrality of the Chief Black Eunuch:

It is the Kısar Aga who is the organiser of this feast, for which he receives a modest sum for expenses. As guardian of the Imperial harem, of the two harems of Mecca and Medina, and as first officer of the Court, it is his right to be responsible for this feast to the Sultan and the great Officers of State, because it is the most solemn and most demanding of all; and as guardian of the purity and honour of the Imperial harem, and the other two sacred ones, his responsibilities symbolize, too, the solemn event of Mohammed's birth.¹⁰

Traveller and author Albert Smith saw the head eunuch of the seraglio while sailing from Istanbul on 25 September 1849 on a boat heading for the Sea of Marmara. If he were the Kızlar Ağası and not the seraglio's head eunuch, it would have been Tayfur Ağa aboard the vessel that was carrying Circassians and Turks, mostly Muslims, to their hajj in Mecca. Smith noted the dress of passengers, including the headgear, but wrote that the 'head eunuch of the royal seraglio' was the only person wearing a fez. Further, he was wearing a 'yellow silk spotted in scarlet, and blue trousers'. According to Smith, all the other Turks were old and wearing turbans. On the eunuch's feet were European boots that Smith said were the 'only Frank innovation' that he glimpsed anyone wearing. Tayfur would only serve until February the following year and would die in November 1851.¹¹

Malik-Khanam, the wife of a high administrator, wrote about her interactions with the harem eunuchs in her autobiography. Her husband was called away and it was not considered proper etiquette for a married woman to socialize publicly without her spouse. Those who did visit her were the ladies and the eunuchs of the palace. She reported that both

groups were sincere with her and did not project the affected manners of others. Malik-Khanam noted that some of the eunuchs were accomplished poets and musicians:

Ferhad-Agha, for example, combined both these qualities. He was a genuine troubadour, whose chivalrous sentiments and gayety of heart repelled every thing that was ignoble, or that savored the spleen. His besetting weakness, however, was a love of *rakı*; but this was only natural: from all time, Bacchus and the Muses have dwelt together in harmony.¹²

In his journal, writer and traveller (James) Bayard Taylor described his encounters while touring the Middle East. In his entry dated Monday, 19 July 1852, he wrote that the last feast of Ramadan occurred the previous Saturday and that the three-day Şeker Bayramı (Sugar Festival) had begun on Sunday. He conveyed in detail the sultan's procession to the mosque (Sultan Ahmed Camii, or Blue Mosque) and the uniforms and dress of the participants. In the entourage of Sultan Abdülmecid I was the Chief Black Eunuch, whom Taylor briefly mentioned. However, unlike other European travellers, he seemed to understand the power of the Kızlar Ağa because he observed, 'After the Paşas came the entire household of the Sultan, including even his eunuchs, cooks and constables. The Kızlar Ağa, or Chief Eunuch, a tall African in resplendent costume, is one of the most important personages connected with the Court.'¹³

Taylor was able to accompany the 2–3,000 who walked from the mosque to the Seraglio and then to its inner court. The ceremony of subjects kissing the sultan's feet began as well as the kissing of his golden scarf by those 'not considered worthy to touch the Sultan's person'. Again, the description is brief, but Taylor still managed to convey at least the symbolic importance of the Chief Black Eunuch standing on the left side of the imperial throne, on the side opposite the Grand Vizier.¹⁴

An African Muslim enslaved a short time in Istanbul, Nicholas Said, described the Chief Black Eunuch in a book that he had published in the United States in 1873. Said, born Mohammed Ali Ben Said circa 1832 in northern Nigeria, had the distinct experience of being enslaved while a youth in Africa, being taken to Tripoli and, later, accompanying his owner to Mecca and Medina. His master sold him to a Faud Pacha, who

took Said to Istanbul to be his pipe cleaner. After nine months, Faud sold him to his brother-in-law, Reschid Pacha, to serve in the same capacity. Faud was minister of the interior and, since he frequented the sultan's court, Said 'had excellent opportunities of seeing and learning many things in regard to the Turkish etiquette and mode of living in the highest circles'. Although Said remained in Istanbul until about 1853, the Chief Black Eunuch whom he met would have been Arif Ağa. Said would have been about 15 or 16 years old when he arrived in Istanbul:

The Kiskar-Ağa, or chief of the negro eunuchs, was a native of Mandra [Cameroon] and knew my mother's family perfectly. He was about fifty years of age, and was a good and kind man. On my becoming acquainted with him, he showed me many marks of kindness, and more than a dozen times introduced me into the Seraglio.¹⁵

However, Said was not impressed with the behaviour of eunuchs that he observed in Reschid Pasha's harem. He wrote that those men could be exceptionally cruel to the women, which 'always exasperates my feelings almost beyond control'.

Reschid Pacha was very wealthy, and in consequence had a large number of wives and concubines, beautiful Circassian, Affgan and Persian girls, for whom my heart has often bled and my blood boiled with anger when I saw them cuffed and beaten by the brutal eunuchs who were their custodians, and who enjoyed full authority to chastise any of them who gave the slightest offence.¹⁶

Abdül Aziz (1861–1876) was sultan when teacher and writer Emmeline Lott, an English woman, became a governess to his household. For a short period, she lived at the Dolmabahçe Sarayı. Miss Lott noted the power of the Chief Eunuch, as she designated him, and his ability to require 'tips' from the harem women. This, of course, added to his riches. As guardian of the harem, he exercised a tight control over the women:

The whole of the women, Princesses, ladies of the Harem, and slaves, are entirely under his control. His word is law, his smile

sunshine; and that is always obtainable by bestowing a proper amount of baksheesh. Well do I know it, for often have I seen the Kızlar Ağa salaam their Highnesses the Princesses, smile, and hold out his hands to them, exclaiming Sish! Sish! 'baksheesh,' when they invariably sent for their cash-box, and, opening it, placed handfuls of bright new sovereigns into his hands.

His frown, however, is dark as a stormy cloud; for if he declines to allow them to go out either, into the grounds, in the *caïque* [Bosporus rowing barge], or open carriage, they have no remedy, but must, like all poor prisoners, submit to his will and pleasure.¹⁷

Miss Lott arrived from Egypt on an armed 42-gun steamer, the *Mehmed Ali*. Among the passengers were members of the sultan's household, including one of the royal princesses. The imperial entourage was to march down the gangplank to the waiting ten-yard-long rowing barges. Lott described the stately procession, led by the Chief Black Eunuch:

In the mean time three *caïques* had been drawn up to the gangway ladder, which, as well as the whole of the deck, had been covered with fine Brussels carpeting. All being ready the Sultan's Grand Eunuch rose up from the sofa and led the Princess Valide to the gangway. He took hold of the front of her robe, on one side walked her own tall stately sinister-looking creole of a Grand Eunuch, and on the other our own noble Grand Eunuch, who was followed by the Princess Epouse. Behind walked three of our other Eunuchs, dressed à la Européenne in black, as they all doffed their Egyptian costume while in Turkey, holding drawn swords in their hands.¹⁸

Military officers stood on each side of the gangway and the party formed two lines, moving between them. The boats had mattresses and cushions on the inside where the princesses sat. The eunuchs knelt on a raised platform, each with their swords now at their waists. The Chief Black Eunuch's sword had a gold hilt while the others were silver. Four men operated the boats, attired in white silk shirts and blue silk trousers that reached the knees. Their jackets were blue with gold embroidery and wore fezzes. Lott and dignitaries entered their designated boats.

The Chief Black Eunuch descended the gangplank after them, 'holding in his hand a black silk velvet beg completely covered with silver, which contained the jewels of the Valide Princess. He was attended by another eunuch, carrying her Highness's cash box, which was similarly covered.' The cash box had a silver handle in the centre. Each of the chests went in a separate caique, covered with a cloth of gold.¹⁹

Woman traveller Frances Elliott, in her *Diary of an Idle Woman in Constantinople*, furnished us with yet another portrait of a Chief Black Eunuch. She reported that he was 'gorgeous with ringing plaques of gold, sounding like bells, conducting a bevy of princesses'. Elliott also noted that the harem was 'a world of magic, in which eunuchs rule, and the Sultan, however often he changes, is exalted to a god'.²⁰

When Eldon Rutter made her trip to Mecca in the late nineteenth century, she made the following observation on the Blacks eunuchs, including the Chief Eunuch. According to her, 'the Aghas are nearly all repulsively ugly' plus 'they are usually of a startlingly emaciated appearance, tall, and terrifying bony'. She did concede that 'one or two of them, however, are handsome, and all exhibit an expression of supermundane aloofness'.²¹

In many other descriptions of eunuchs, they were supposedly obese. The African eunuchs that Rutter saw, however, seemed to be tall and thin, not the stereotypical overweight character. Curvature of the spine was a condition noted in Chinese eunuchs but not in Africans. Perhaps there might have been some physical factors for those differences in the two groups, such as diet.²²

Nitisha Sultana was a Georgian woman captured during the reign of Sultan Abdül Hamit II. In her book *My Harem Life*, she described her years in Istanbul and her climb to become the sultan's favourite. She also wrote about her interactions with the Chief Black Eunuch, showing that he had a sense of humour as well as an immense amount of power:

We used to tease the Kızlar Ağa in many ways, pretend we were ill, or that we had secrets, or had heard girls discuss their escape. All these jokes of ours he repaid us for, by telling us so and so had incurred the anger of a Kadın [wife of a sultan], or that the

cosmetic was sent to the wrong wife, or that one of us was becoming ugly or yellow-faced.

How he laughed at us, as we rushed to the nearest looking glass to see how we looked, then when we turned round he was gone.

We used to hide from him, and have the others say we had not been seen for hours, or say we had seen a ghost and beg him to look for it.

Then we laughed, said it was all fun, and begged him to take us down the Bosphorus the next afternoon, for his power was very great, and he did not like to be teased too much, and, after all, to be responsible for over two hundred of us, and our slaves as well, was a position of much anxiety.²³

Nitisha Sultana also described the Kızlar Ağası's clothing. She noted the difference between how he dressed in the palace and how he dressed outside. According to her, 'He was a magnificent figure in a long coat of white satin, trimmed down the front and round the hem with fur, and on his head a high golden turban-like headdress with a dangling gold tassel at the side.' She found out that outside the palace he wore a black coat and none of the splendor displayed in the palace.²⁴ Penzer wrote that the 'costume of the Kızlar Ağası consisted of an under-robe of flowered silk with a broad sash wound round the waist'. Covering that was 'a pelisse of green, blue, or red material with long sleeves nearly reaching to the ground. It was trimmed with sable or other rare furs'. The hat was not the turban usually depicted in many paintings and drawings but 'a huge white sugar-loaf affair, worn at a slant on the back of the head'.²⁵

The Kızlar Ağası was responsible for training the women in good table manners and demeanour as well as other aspects of their lives. He commented on the posture and the quantity of jewellery the women wore. He bought Nitisha Sultana at a slave market and took her to Istanbul. Although she stopped fearing him, she was still impressed with his bearing:

I had become accustomed to him now, but never forgot how both he and his man who had bought me and brought me to Constantinople had terrified me.

A very commanding figure he looked, towering head and shoulders above even the tallest of us, and looking taller than ever by reason of the high headdress he wore.

Very imposing, too, he looked, attended as he always was by four tall sword-bearers, grim of face and stalwart in appearance.²⁶

Some other very important sources regarding the descriptions of the Kızlar Ağalar were albums the court artists painted. They date from the late sixteenth century and portray them with dignity. A 1597 manuscript has an Ottoman prince and Grand Vizier, plus African servants, plus African eunuchs attending to the heir apparent. Another picture illustrates the funeral of Nur Banu, the sultan's mother, and features the African eunuchs. In 1711, Jean-Baptiste Vanmour, a Flemish artist and a member of the sultan's entourage, painted 'The Hunting Scene in Turkey'. The rendering depicted Sultan Ahmed III (1703–1730), members of the court and a eunuch. In Choiseul-Gouffier's *Voyages Pittoresques delà Grèce*, he included a copper engraving of a noble-looking Chief Black Eunuch, dated 1822. However, it appears to be based somewhat on fantasy because the eunuch's dress is not accurate.

Still, many Western artists created fantastic images of the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East based on exotic illusions of supposedly incomprehensible peoples. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, Léon Gérôme, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Hans Makart and Edmond Dulac are but a few of the artists who would use spurious European descriptions plus imagination to paint exotic scenes of the East.²⁷ It would be the court artists who would produce images that were more accurate:

A [...] volume, illustrated by the great painter Levni in about 1720–32, depicts in great detail the ceremonies and celebrations at the circumcision of a young prince. In one picture, we see princes, pages, and black eunuchs at an evening party by the Golden Horn; in another, the chief black eunuch conducts the young prince to the circumcision ceremony.²⁸

Again, Sir Richard Burton wrote his observations of a 'Eunuch-in-Chief' who he saw during a Middle East travel. Burton seems to have been impressed with the eunuch's bearing:

The frame is unnaturally long and lean, especially the arms and legs; with high, flat, thin shoulders; big protruding joints and a face by contrast extraordinarily large, a veritable mask; the Castrato is expert in the use of weapons and sits his horse admirably, riding well 'home' in the saddle for the best of reasons; and his hoarse thick voice, which apparently does not break, as in the European 'Cáppone,' invests him with all the circumstances of command.²⁹

Three women who resided in the harem from 1876 until 1924 wrote memoirs that Douglas Scott Brookes assembled in his book, *The Concubine, the Princess, and the Teacher*. Concubine Filizten, Princess Ayşe Osmanoglu and schoolteacher Safiye Ünüvar recorded various details of their worlds and experiences, including some observations on Chief Black Eunuchs Tayfur Ağa, Cevher Ağa and Nadir Ağa, although Princess Ayşe mentioned Hafız Behrâm Ağa (1880–1887), Şerefeddin Ağa (1887–1888), Mehmed Yâver Ağa (1888–1898) and Abdülganı Ağa (1898–1899) in passing. She recorded that Hafız Behrâm Ağa was very influential and that Abdülganı Ağa served 'until Papa's [Sultan Abdül Hamit II] dethronement'.³⁰

Concubine Filizten recorded that Cevher Ağa was assigned the administration and oversight of Çırağan Palace, completed in 1871, and throughout her entries she mentioned his comings and goings between the Yıldız and Çırağan palaces.³¹ Still, it is quite evident that Cevher Ağa wielded a significant amount of power in the name of the sultan. The Yıldız Palace was the residence of Abdül Hamit II while his brother, Murad V, was confined to the latter palace after his brother deposed him after only 93 days on the throne.

Princess Ayşe commented on the death of Cevher Ağa, who was hanged from the Galata Bridge on 26 May 1909. According to her, Cevher Ağa was an innocent victim 'and not a shred of evidence was submitted in proof' that he was a conspirator in a counterrevolution. She remembered him in this manner:

He had been presented as a gift to Papa by Arab Mehmed Pasha before Papa came to the throne, and since those days had served Papa faithfully. He was known in the palace as an honourable, conscientious official well versed in the customs and traditions of the palace.³²

Medical Examinations

An article by Dr Edmund Andrews, MD, published in 1898, mentioned a Dr Dadirrian of New York, 'a highly educated Armenian physician, who practiced thirteen years in Constantinople, and knows many eunuchs'. Andrews mentioned no years in which Dr Dadirrian practised in Turkey, but the latest date would have been 1885. Dr Dadirrian commented on the eunuchs' temperament and on their supposed jealousy. Although a medical doctor, he was able to provide important sociological and psychological input:

To my knowledge they are brave, faithful and accurate in their duties. The Chief Eunuch can always communicate with the Sultan personally and is held almost equal to the Grand Vizier. The eunuchs' position is always very high and the ladies of the harem treat them very kindly. They are melancholy, not from ill treatment, but because they feel their isolation and deprivation of manly enjoyments.³³

Dr Dadirrian argued that the assertion that eunuchs were 'malignantly jealous' was not true, but an 'amusing blunder' that Western travellers made. They did not understand 'the laws and etiquette of Constantinople'. Dr Dadirrian then described events that led travellers to arrive at their mistaken conclusion:

The truth is this: When any of the ladies of the harem go out to ride, one or more eunuchs go with them as protectors, sometimes on horseback, sometimes on foot. Now in Constantinople it is a serious insult to any royal lady, and through her to the Sultan, to stare intently at her in passing. The eunuch's official duty is to protect her from that or any other insult by instantly attacking the offender, whom he may beat or even kill, and no questions will be asked. Western travellers seem to have supposed him to be actuated by 'malignant jealousy.' The fact is there is no more personal jealousy in him than there is in a paving stone. His is simply doing his official duty as a harem guard, and takes pains to execute it with such an appearance of alertness and force as will satisfy any imperial spy that may be watching him that he is a

officer who understands his business and guards his ladies with what a Yankee would call 'vim and snap.' By continuing to do this he hopes to stand well at the palace as a protector of the ladies and to obtain future promotion.³⁴

In his work titled *History of Circumcision* published in 1891, P. C. Remondino, MD, recounted the observations of M. Mondat of Montpellier, who wrote *De la Stérilité de l'Homme et de la Femme*. Published in 1840, Mondat studied castrated Turkish eunuchs, not the emasculated ones, to determine why some could copulate. He found some who could copulate, 'secured some of the ejaculated fluid, and subjected it to a careful examination'. He was investigating eunuchs' abilities at copulation and found that, in spite of the prevailing stereotypes, some could. In effect, his research supported the assumption that to be 'safe', the owner of a harem should have 'clean cut' eunuchs instead of ones merely castrated:

The discharge was lacking the characteristic seminal odour; it was in other respects, to the palpation especially, very much like the seminal fluid. He found that these eunuchs were much given to venereal enjoyment, but that either legitimate intercourse or masturbation, to which many were addicted, was apt to be followed by a marasmus ending in galloping consumption.³⁵

Medical evidence supports Sir Richard Burton's comment about the unusually long limbs of the eunuchs. Drs Hikmet (Hamdi) and Felix Regnault studied eunuchs of Constantinople and described them in their article, 'Les eunuques de Constantinople', published in 1896. Included in the article is a photograph of a eunuch skeleton and its contrast to non-eunuch skeletons is remarkable. Although there is no measuring device such as a ruler in the photograph to judge the height of the skeleton, it is obvious that the head is relatively small when compared to the total body length (in art this would be a nine-head figure, meaning that the head was one-ninth the length of the body). The right humerus seems slightly shorter than the left but perhaps the display is not level at the shoulders. In any case, the elbows touch the body below the top of the pelvis. The fingertips seem to almost touch the kneecaps and the elongated fingers along with the hand, measured from the wrist to the fingertips, seem to equal the vertical measurement of the skull.

The length as measured from the proximal end of the femur to the distal end of the tibia seems to exceed the length of the arms, measured from the proximal end to the fingertips, by a factor of only 1:1.³⁶

The measurements made by the medical doctors support the renditions that artists made of Black eunuchs in their long-sleeved robes that dangled so low. It also helps one to understand why some observers thought it amusing to observe the Black eunuchs riding horses. Their elongated limbs would certainly have made them compelling mounted figures in contrast to other riders.

Hikmet and Regnault reported that eunuchs began as Black Nubians of the Upper Nile Valley or Abyssinians (Amhara of Ethiopia) sold as children, and shipped from Tripoli to Turkey. They reported on the operation of manufacturing eunuchs, saying that they were strapped to a chair with cords and someone used a razor to remove the penis and testicles. To stop the haemorrhage the person conducting the operation used boiling oil plus a balm of wax, lard and plaster instead of sewing the blood vessels. According to them, nine-tenths of the 'patients' died.

Another process involved the cutting but used hot, dry sand instead of a balm. The operators placed a nail in the opening to stop the discharge of urine. Those castrated were usually between the ages of ten and 12 years old, but rarely over 15. One of the men reported that he saw a eunuch who was married and had children. He had hair on his chest and pubic region and believed that the children were his. Perhaps, he might have undergone the operation at a later age or the operation might have been either botched or fragmentary.³⁷

When the doctors examined the perineum area, located between the anus and the rear of the external genitalia, they noted the existence of a greyish-white scar or cicatrix, signaling the former attachment of an organ or part. They could not feel any of the tendons that would have gone to the penis. There was a hole for urinating. Rectal exams on two eunuchs showed that the prostate had atrophied.

They noted no body hair or beard, but there were eyebrows, eyelashes and head hair. After age 12, the beard diminished but did not completely disappear, for there were a few straight hairs. The voices were high, and the men were very tall with long, disproportionate limbs. One can also see elongated limbs, according to the doctors, in castrated cattle and capons. The skulls were also tall and the nape of the neck alignment had an exaggerated curve to support the skull.

The doctors continued their examination but their conclusions sometimes seemed to contain unsubstantiated material and even rumor. They claimed that those chosen as eunuchs fit certain standards. They had an agreeable face, large eyes, thin lips, aquiline nose, fine skin, elegant waist, and delicate hands. However, they acknowledged that those might be characteristics of their 'race'. They were handsome but often they became obese. Their stature gave them fat buttocks and breasts. They became prematurely senile between the ages of 30 and 35. The skin also lost suppleness and became dry and scaly but they generally kept their teeth, which were strong and white. The eunuchs frequently battled tuberculosis but could live a long time, some having attained extreme old age. Their hands and feet became elongated.³⁸

Following is a list of attributes of eunuchs, according to the doctors. Many of them seem to be stereotypes and not scientifically accurate while others appear to be correct:

- (1) They can still feel sexual sensations and women are attracted to them.
- (2) They look for friendship. Eunuchs like to kiss and hug the women, receiving sensual and pleasurable physical feelings.
- (3) One eunuch was legitimately married and slept with his wife, but could only do so outside the palace.
- (4) They do not like alcohol or cannot tolerate it. The smallest dose makes them lose their senses.
- (5) They like luxurious foods, cakes and sweets. They do not like meat, but do offer it to guests.
- (6) They are very clean and neat.
- (7) Bright colours such as red please them. They decorate their rooms in red and gold.
- (8) They like music and in particular, instruments such as tambourines and Black African instruments.
- (9) They wear jewelry with rows of rings. They do so because of suggestions from the women rather than from their physiological state.
- (10) They are misers and very greedy. They do not spend anything on pleasures and, therefore, become rich.
- (11) The principle trait of their character is the ease in which they let themselves easily follow suggestions. They are easily influenced by suggestion.

- (12) They accept the least affirmation without proof. They believe most calumny or slanderous charges about others. They do not use judgement but have a love for the supernatural. They prefer the illogical above the logical.
- (13) Once they have attached their conviction to something, it is impossible to get them to change their opinion.
- (14) They like children and animals, such as chickens, sheep, cows, monkeys and especially cats. One eunuch used to have his cat eat at a special table.
- (15) They are neither mean nor cruel, and stay loyal to their friends and to their master. However, they have no courage.
- (16) They have no intellectual interests, no brain activity. They do not get involved in politics or wars. They have no education. It is rare if they know how to read and write.
- (17) Like children, they are gay and laugh for no reason. They possess a sense of wonderment. They are proud but naïve, and get upset easily.
- (18) For entertainment, they play dominos, lotto, dice, cards, and bet on cockfights, but they do not bet much because they are parsimonious.
- (19) They smoke a lot – cigarettes and water pipes. Their fanaticism is extreme, just like that of women, because of their relationship with the mullahs.
- (20) They do not have any relationship with the outside world and, therefore, maintain their prejudices.³⁹

The work of Dr P. Marie, the Chief Doctor of Asylums, examined a eunuch in Egypt during 1907. Another physician, Dr J. Warnock, allowed Marie access to the patient at the mental institution. Marie gave the name of the patient as S. A. Allam, which seems to be a play on the standard Arabic word for a greeting, 'salaam'. He was very interested in hallucinations and erotic psychosis, since there was not much published on the subject and he wanted to add to the discussion.

The patient was 40 years old and was institutionalized because he had an altercation with a woman on a street. He had been castrated at Kordofan in the Sudan. His owner had died several years ago and he was probably a free man at that time, but it was not clear. According to Marie, 'He used to intoxicate himself habitually with hashish.' While in the asylum he manifested delusions of grandeur and satisfaction, 'due to

troubles of a genital nature'. While 'S. A. Allam' was clearly delusional, what Marie did was to connect his mental illness with his physical state. Therefore, it is important to provide details of the former to connect the physical and mental states.

'S. A. Allam' said that an invisible princess possessed him and came to him and touched him frequently. He heard her voice saying that she wanted to marry him and was waiting for the right moment. Why did he attack the woman on the street? Because she was after him and wanted to rape him to be his spouse. In his mind, he was defending himself to stay loyal to the princess. In addition, he was already married, according to the Qur'an, and had other wives and children from those women. Voices said that he had to marry the princess. He had a lot of sexual power and, when the princess possessed him, he experienced extreme pleasure and ejaculated. She penetrated into his body and possessed him. He reported that he experienced what was called coenesthesia, sensations from all sources affecting the whole body. He complained of fatigue and cramps and attributed it to sexual fatigue. He spoke freely about his sexual powers as well as his intellectual capacity.

After his initial agitation upon entering the asylum, 'S. A. Allam' became less coherent and more depressed, but that behaviour varied daily. Marie said that this was a state of dementia mixed with 'breaths of excitations', probably like manic depression. After two years of alternating excitement and depression, he entered a period of steady calm and then could take care of himself. He was released from the asylum in 1905. The only remaining mark of mental troubles was the persistence of genital sensations and 'the conviction of his state of princely marriage'. According to Marie, the patient had been in a confused period of hallucination that he blamed on 'toxic origins', which added to his dominant tone of the erotic and his drive. He also noted a 'congenital debility'.

Marie made some critical physical observations. According to him, like most eunuchs, the patient was above average height in spite of a mild curvature of the spine and a deviation of the legs, which showed signs of bowing. There was enlargement of the pelvis and subcutaneous fat deposits on the breasts, hips and belly, giving the patient a more feminine appearance. There was elongation of the 'inferior members' (forearms) of the length of the legs, in spite of the bowing, and was the principle cause of increased height as observed in most eunuchs castrated at a young age.

There was no abundant hair. The face was beardless and there was only thin hair on the armpits and pubis. There was no exaggerated development of the hands or feet, nor was there prognathism, where the jaws would project beyond the upper face. That aspect of his face seemed no different from other people from the Sudan.

There was nothing abnormal in the general functions of his circulation, digestive and respiratory systems. There were no anomalies in the patient's reflexes. Marie noted that the muscular strength was below average when the hands were pressed but, overall, there were no other marked weaknesses worth mentioning. The gait was normal.

Marie then made a statement that appeared to have nothing to do with his previous objective observation. He exclaimed that the patient had no culture, using the statement, 'Culture nulle!' What Marie seemed to be doing was referring to the works of Paul Broca (1821–1880) and others who were measuring people and skeletons to develop a hierarchy of humans, using White European males as the standard. Thus, Marie's observations and measurements had more than one agenda and led him to state, 'Culture nulle!'

Immediately after his terse statement, Marie recorded more observations. He noted, 'from a genital point of view, the patient's castration scar left no "saillie"'. There was no remnant of the penis nor was there a scrotum fold, only a urinary opening. A rectal examination revealed a normal prostate, which was not normal for eunuchs. The spermatic vesicles had not atrophied and appeared to be functional. What Marie had concluded, something not clearly demonstrated previously, was that castration would not necessarily kill the erotic.

The patient's vesicular glands could still secrete, but without sperm, of course. Orgasm and ejaculation would be caused by excitement at the opening of the urethra, since the site of the scar served as the base of the nerves. The scar site was probably the site of what people know as 'the phantom limb symptom'. With people who lose a limb, sometimes they feel as if there is itching or pain when there is nothing there. Likewise, Marie hypothesized that the eunuch patient was evoking similar feelings in his phantom penis following his post-puberty castration. Therefore, the psycho-erotic is independent from functional ability. It would appear that some eunuchs do experience sexual feelings despite lacking external 'equipment' and in the case of 'S. A. Allam', it was probably a major contributor to his mental state. His libido was functioning but he was

sexually frustrated because he could not (or did not know how to) gain release and according to the thinking of the time, was not even supposed to be able to have such feelings.

Although there were many jokes and humourous tales regarding all the eunuchs, one of the funniest accounts occurred during a visit by European royalty. According to the story, in November 1889, William II (Kaiser Frederick Wilhelm Viktor Albert, German emperor and King of Prussia) paid a state visit to Istanbul. His wife, the Empress, accompanied him and asked one of the most inadvertently ludicrous questions ever asked a eunuch:

The German state visit was touched by one item of unintended humour. When the Empress visited the harem, she was met at the Gate of Felicity by the Kızlar Ağa, and it was explained to her that the Chief Black Eunuch was a highly important personage; at which the Empress, trying to make conversation – and knowing nothing of eunuchs – brightly asked the Kızlar Ağa through the interpreter whether his father had also been a eunuch.⁴⁰

In an article they published in 1908 and continued in 1910, medical doctors Julius Tandler and Siegfried Grosz also examined and measured all aspects of five eunuchs. There is only one short paragraph in that work that even mentions eunuchs from Istanbul. Although their study is quite thorough, their observations do not deviate much from the previous ones. Still, the articles, with accompanying photographs, have to be the most comprehensive ones produced by the medical field until that time.⁴¹

Medical science, of course, continues its interest in castration because it remains an option for the treatment of specific types of testicular and prostate cancers. Further, chemical and surgical castration for convicted sex offenders is still an important topic of discussion surrounding the effectiveness of such procedures. Current medical research has done a lot to uncover some of the myths surrounding male sexuality and sexual organs, although there seems to still be some unanswered questions. Still, some findings may help to clarify some questions surrounding the sexual activities (or lack of them) of the eunuchs.

Specifically, testicles and their supposed relationship to 'manhood' are rooted in myth, fantasy and cultural values. It is common knowledge

that when Romans and others 'testified', one hand covered the testes (or in Latin, *testis*). Even the word 'Testament', as used in the Biblical 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament', implies "witness", "last will" and in the Biblical sense, "covenant".

With such an emphasis on testicles as 'manhood', one would think that they would play a very high level of importance in the human species. When looking at other primates, however, some serious questions arise surrounding such an assumption. Chimpanzees, for instance, are promiscuous and therefore the male has a relatively large testicular size that it flaunts for the females so that he can breed quickly with many females. Monogamous primates such as gorillas and orangutans have smaller testes in relation to body size. Myth and fantasy suggest that the human male who is abundantly endowed is more 'masculine' and, therefore, more sexually potent. Current research questions some of those assumptions:

Recent anatomical and physiological data suggest strongly that the relationship between large testes and sperm competition in promiscuous breeding systems is not just a fantasy. The ratio of testes to body weight in promiscuous primates varies from 0.2 to 0.8 g/kg, whereas this ratio in monogamous primates is much less and varies from 0.02 to 0.13 g/kg. For human males, a ratio of 0.06g/kg has been calculated, suggesting that [...] humans are equipped for monogamous breeding.⁴²

The researchers also measured other aspects of primate sexuality including rate of sperm production and the speed and the length of tails of the sperm. One of the implications of the study is that 'castration is a severe assault on the body-image and sense of masculinity'. Another is that the 'deeply ingrained cultural and historical pressure on those who perceive a loss of their male 'witness' may cause irrevocable psychological problems'.⁴³ What some of the eunuchs have clearly demonstrated in their lives is that it is possible to have sexual relationships and even some level of sexual fulfilment although emasculated. Perhaps, it is because of the aforementioned 'fantasies, beliefs, myths and cultural values about the testes' that continue to arouse such interest and questions in their sexual lives.

CHAPTER 9

PERSONAL LIVES OF THE CHIEF BLACK EUNUCHS

Eunuchs could engage in sexual relationships because some of them did not suffer from a complete loss of libido. Those castrated before puberty, however, usually had some diminished yearnings. If emasculation did not involve removal of the penis, some eunuchs could actively engage in intercourse. In the Ottoman world, the Black eunuchs had to be completely emasculated and, even so, many young women in the harem desired sexual relationships with them. Some knew that they would not have an opportunity to marry an important person in the court or their owner if they were in a large harem. Commonly, the owner or the court officials were older men who did not satisfy the young women. For sexual fulfilment, they might turn to homosexual relationships with other harem women or turn to the eunuchs. In either case, there would be no pregnancy:

After all, the eunuch, even the absolute eunuch, was more masculine than another woman. That kind of eunuch, deprived of all his genital organs, still possessed – as somebody had already put it so aptly – his eyes and his hands; and those were the hands and eyes of a man, or almost a man (and more often than not a young one; and quite often a good looking one).¹

Juvenal the satirist also addressed the subject of eunuchs and sexuality, but with ribald humour. The following lines from *Satire VI*,

published in AD 116, addressed the subject of men retaining their libido if castrated as they approach or reach adulthood. Such fears motivated the sultans and others who owned eunuchs to have them inspected every few years to see if anything had grown back to allow them to have intercourse. Since the White eunuchs were only castrated and, thereby, only partially emasculated, it might have been one of several reasons that the sultans preferred African eunuchs. Juvenal asserted that in his day, some women knew that eunuchs castrated during their late teens and ensuing years could become favoured lovers:

There are girls who adore unmanly eunuchs – so smooth,
 So beardless to kiss, and no worry about abortions!
 But the biggest thrill is one who was fully grown,
 A lusty black-quilled male, before the surgeons
 Went to work on his groyne. Let the testicles ripen
 And drop, fill out till they hang like two-pound weights;
 Then what the surgeon drops will hurt nobody's trade but the
 barber's.

(Slave-dealers' boys are different: pathetically weak,
 Ashamed of their empty bag, their lost little chickpeas.)
 Look at that specimen – you could spot him a mile off,
 Everyone knows him – displaying his well-endowed person
 At the baths: Priapus might be jealous. And yet
 He's a eunuch. His mistress arranged it. So, let them sleep
 together – ²

Adventurer Count Raoul Du Bisson, who went to Abyssinia in 1863, illustrated why those having harems wanted emasculated men to guard the women, and why they demanded periodic checkups as well. It was the failure to understand anatomy and libido that caused some to question seriously their basic assumptions regarding eunuchism. On one occasion in East Africa, he reportedly saw the chief eunuch of 'the Grand Cherif of Mecca – a large, finely-proportioned, powerful black – on his way to Stamboul for trial and sentence'. Du Bisson noted that he was heavily chained and guarded:

It appears that the eunuch had only been partly castrated, and that the operation had been performed during infancy; his

testicles had not fully descended, so that in the operation the sac was simply obliterated, which gave him the appearance of a eunuch. In this condition he seemed to have kept a perfect control of himself and passions until made chief eunuch of the Cherif, who possessed a well-assorted harem of choice Circassian, Georgian, and European beauties. The *négligé* toilet of the harem bath and the seductive influence of this terrestrial Koranic seventh heaven was too much for the warm Soudanese blood of the chief; his forays were not suspected until a blonde Circassian *houri* presented her lord and master, the Cherif, with a suspiciously mulatto-looking son and heir. A consultation of the Koran failed to explain this discrepancy, and suspicion pointed to the chief eunuch, who was accordingly watched; it was found that he had not only corrupted the fair Circassian, but every inmate of the harem as well. The harem was promptly sacked and drowned and the false eunuch shipped to the Sultan for sentence, the Cherif having the right to sentence and drown the harem, but having no such rights over such a high personage as the chief eunuch.³

Retired Kızlar Ağası Sünbül Ağa was not the only Chief Black Eunuch who married, as the following interview discloses. As many people realize, marriage does not necessarily depend on love *or* sex. For others, those particulars might be the sole basis of some marital relationships. Respect, protection, religious or political beliefs, height, weight, age and many other factors have been the glue that have held many marriages together. No less a personage than traveller and writer Sir Richard Burton asked about the sex life of a married eunuch and wrote this very detailed account:

[...] yet almost all these neutrals have wives with whom they practice the manifold *plaisirs de la petit oie* (masturbation, tribadism, irrumation, *tête-bêche*, *feuille-de-rose*, etc.), till they induce the venereal orgasm. Such was the account once given to me by a eunuch's wife; and I need hardly say that she, like her confrerie was to be pitied. At the critical moment she held up a little pillow for her husband to bite who otherwise would have torn her cheeks or breast.⁴

John Richards wrote about eunuchs and marriage in a manuscript dated 1699–1700 that is in the collection of the British Museum. Like many people not familiar with eunuchs, he wondered about their sex lives. Inadvertently, he also revealed some of his ideas about sex:

There is a 3^d Sort of Marriage if it may be so called between an Eunuch and a Woman and I hear meane those who are cut close, not withstanding w^h it is credibly reported that they have commerce in a manner unknown to us, and it is no great matter, nay eaven the Women amongst themselves have ways of Suplying the Deffect of Men & it is not to be wondered att that these miserable Creatures who have no other knowledge of themselves than that [they] are made for the use of Man, nor that faith w^h teaches a future reward and punishment for Vertue & Vice, it is not to be admired [wondered?] att y^t they should give themselves up to all maner of Lusts & Sensuality in w^h they say y^t they excell all other Women.⁵

A nineteenth-century Chief Black Eunuch made the following revealing remarks concerning his marriage. He appears to have enjoyed a good relationship, contrary to what many people would have imagined.

I was not looking for love, but for passion. I was unable to satisfy this irresistible desire in the palace. There were many women on whom I looked with desire, but I was deterred by visions of the gallows. Finally, I decided to get married. I married a woman who had come from the palace. You might ask how such a woman could marry such a man as I. I do not know. I never asked this once in all the years that we lived together.⁶

Personal reflections on the Kızlar Ağası are strewn throughout history books, travelogues and biographies, so there have been few collected works on the topic. However, one can compile some information to prepare a profile on some men, such as Hacı Mustafa Ağa. Hacı Mustafa Ağa, who served several sultans, was a powerful figure who was in and out of office through the second reign of Sultan Mustafa I (1622–1623). At one point, Grand Vizier İstanköylü Ali Paşa was able to have him exiled to Egypt but he managed to return to his station. Hacı Mustafa

Ağa served under Ahmed I through his death. Ahmed's favourite wife was Mahfiruz Sultana, who bore the sultan four sons. A second wife, Kösem Sultan (Mahpeyker Sultana), bore six children, beginning a dispute over whose line would sit on the throne. The ruling sultan's eldest son was supposed to be the next sultan, meaning that it should be Mahfiruz Sultana's son Osman. Through bribery, Kösem Sultana successfully manoeuvred to place Ahmed's brother Mustafa on the throne. Although Mustafa was mentally ill, Kösem planned to let Mustafa rule and, when the time was ripe, kill Osman and then place her sons on the throne. However, Mustafa's mental condition deteriorated so quickly that her rival's son, Genç Osman (Young Osman) ascended the throne at age 14 as Osman II (1618–1622). It was Hacı Mustafa Ağa who played a critical role in having Mustafa I locked in a palace apartment (Kafes) when the latter's mental illness greatly disturbed the Chief Black Eunuch.⁷

Hacı Mustafa Ağa was so influential that he was able to send an Ottoman fleet to Crimea with the purpose of replacing the ruling Khan with the previous one. That so upset the Kazakhs that they sailed as far as the Bosphorus and destroyed the village of Yeniköy, which dates from Byzantine times. The ruling Khan, Mehmed Giray, held on to his position but in 1624 Hacı Mustafa Ağa died of distress brought about by his failure.⁸

In the latter part of the 1500s, approximately from 1572 to 1587, Ali b. Mustafa performed his hajj and managed to travel to several other countries as well. He left us his personal thoughts and philosophies, *Mir'at al-Hubush fi al-usul* (*The Reflections of the Ethiopians in the Sources*), in which he discussed Ethiopians. It appears that he saw his first group of Ethiopians in Mecca and wanted to meet them. He was not able to do so until after his return to Istanbul. Wanting to dispel some myths about Ethiopians, Ali b. Mustafa investigated stereotypes about them to divulge those untruths. After meeting Hacı Mustafa Ağa, he wrote the following flattering description.

He saw '(a) group of Ethiopians, extremely happy and cheerful'. He then met 'the greatest and most generous Ethiopian in the service of Constantinople, the sciences and knowledge, and the administration of Mecca and Medina' who he called His Eminence Mustafa Ağa b. 'Abd al-Manar, 'who is honoured with service to the greatest of the Ottomans; I mean the Sultan of Sultans [...] Ahmad Khan son of the late Sultan Muhammad Khan b. Sultan Murad Khan'.⁹ Personal contacts with the

Chief Black Eunuch seemed to leave many observers with positive opinions that seem absent from historical accounts.

There were five Chief Black Eunuchs with the name Beşir but Hacı Beşir Ağa I held his position longer than anyone else did. He entered the palace service at a young age, rising under the supervision of Yapraksız Ali Ağa, the Chief Black Eunuch at the time. Beşir I followed the typical route to power, becoming *musahib*, or one of the gentlemen-in-waiting, passing orders from the sultan to harem inhabitants, the Chief Black Eunuch and the Divan. He became treasurer of the government in 1707 but, for some reason, the sultan exiled him to Cyprus and then Egypt in 1713.

Beşir I was not alone in his exile for he went with the disgraced former Chief Black Eunuch Uzun Süleyman Ağa (1704–1713). Grand Vizier Damat Hasan Paşa (18 November 1703 – 28 September 1704) wanted to have Uzun Süleyman Ağa replaced with his own contact, Treasurer Mehmed Ağa. After learning of the plan, Uzun Süleyman Ağa influenced both the mother of Ahmed III and the sultan himself, resulting in the dismissal of the Grand Vizier. Uzun Süleyman Ağa had Moralı Enişte Hasan Paşa replaced with friend Kalaylıkoz Hacı Ahmed Paşa (October 1704 – 25 December 1704), once more demonstrating the power of the Kızlar Ağası.¹⁰ Although Kalaylıkoz Hacı Ahmed Paşa only served for a couple months, Uzun Süleyman Ağa was able to effect a major power shift only five months after attaining office.

Perhaps Beşir I had already acquired significant power and money because he had someone acquire a residence for him in Cairo. It was part of a *vakıf* that included a two-storey house, a stable, three shops, storerooms and other accouterments. He had important political positions while in Cairo and had access to the imperial revenues that endowed his *vakıf*. The sultan then appointed him to serve as supervisor of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina.

Anber Mehmed Ağa, the former Chief of the White Eunuchs of the Imperial Treasury (*Hazinedar Başı*), became Chief Black Eunuch from 1713 to almost 1717. One can still visit a house that he owned and in which he lived. He apparently was the first owner of the Sadullah Paşa Waterside Mansion (*Yalı*), an eighteenth century building on the Asiatic shore. Located in Çengelköy, the Village of the Hooks (between Beylerbeyi and Vanıköy), today the summer home is a hotel for visitors.¹¹ The building is the second oldest remaining private mansion on the Bosphorus.

Near the end of 1716 an Ottoman official arrived in Cairo and announced that Beşir I was Chief Black Eunuch. The messenger then went to Mecca where he found Beşir making his pilgrimage and told him of his new position. After completing his hajj, he returned to Cairo where he rested for 60 days before journeying to Istanbul in April 1717. Now referred to as Hacı Beşir, he created a vakıf of his residence in those two months. The vakıf stipulated that the income was to fill cisterns that he planned to build, provide for orphans, plus pay stipends for five Qur'an reciters, a librarian, his slaves that he freed and others.

Because of his power and influence, Beşir I was able to intercede on behalf of others and, at the same time, increase his personal wealth. In 1722, he obtained an amnesty for an emir who then paid 1,000 purses for supplies for the sultan's kitchen. Another person forced to flee Egypt paid Beşir and the vizier 200 purses each for their assistance. He helped others as well and although there may not be records of 'donations', in all probability there were some. In 1726, a 'rehabilitated' official paid 80,000 zangirlis to the government and 10,000 each to the vizier and Beşir.

As with other Chief Black Eunuchs before and after their appointments, Hacı Beşir Ağa ran into difficulties with the Grand Vizier. İbrahim Paşa (Nevşehirli Damad) (9 May 1718–16 October 1730) did not enjoy his treatment in the palace and, therefore, he attempted to dismiss Hacı Beşir Ağa. The Chief Black Eunuch pleaded his case to the sultan's mother, who backed him. Mother and son disagreed on the matter but the mother won out when she told her son that if he dismissed Hacı Beşir Ağa, 'I am never going to forgive you for that.' The solution to the dispute included sacking İbrahim Paşa and retaining Hacı Beşir Ağa.¹²

Hacı Beşir Ağa I served Ahmed II as Chief Black Eunuch for 13 years and for Mehmed III, 16 years. He is buried in the famous cemetery in Eyüp at the end of the Golden Horn. It is the resting place of Eyüp Ensari, the standard bearer of Mohammed the Prophet, and is the site of Muslim pilgrimages. The bequests of religious structures that Hacı Beşir Ağa I endowed include the following:

Among these constructions were a mosque, kuttap, medrese, library, takiyyah, a sebil and a külliye near Bâb-ı Âli, a school for the study of hadith, a library and a fountain in Eyüp; a masjîd

within Topkapı Sarayı, a variety of constructions around Istanbul, including fountains in Emir, Imam and Sariyer, a medrese and library in Medina, a medrese and library in Zistova, and a library for the Imam A'zam mosque. He also made a waqf in Baghdad of a quantity of books. Cairo also benefited from his endowments.¹³

Beşir Ağa II (Moralı Beşir/Hafız Beşir Ağa/Hattat Beşir Ağa) was the second man of that name to rise to power. He began his career as a slave of Ahmed Paşa, a government tax officer. He became a gift to the palace and began to serve Sultan Mahmud I when the latter was a prince. He rose in rank and in 1730 became a *musahib*, the gentleman-in-waiting who stood guard in front of the sultan's room and who conveyed his messages. After that post under Ahmed III, in 1746 he became Chief Black Eunuch.

Because he desired to acquire some type of skill, Beşir Ağa II took private lessons in Turkish calligraphy from Hafız Mustafa Efendi. Sources describe Beşir as having a vicious temper and was unscrupulous when it benefited him. After becoming Chief Black Eunuch, he had a secretary and a consultant who advised him on some matters. Istanbul was having problems but he had enough power to approve the appointment and resignation of the Grand Viziers. If his approval was bypassed, he would have an arsonist light fires, claiming the fires started because of a jinx on the Grand Vizier. In early 1750, Istanbul suffered from a major fire and, during the end of April of the same year, the Grand Bazaar (Kapalı Çarşı) also caught fire. Even minor government promotions needed his approval, and anyone seeking a position had to bribe him.

After much arson in the city, the sultan began an investigation of their causes. He deduced that Beşir Ağa was behind them and began to plan a method of killing such a powerful enemy. Sultan Mahmud sent Beşir to the Kız Kulesi (Leander's or Maiden's Tower) off the shore of the Asian suburb of Üsküdar. The sultan had given orders to a Muslim judge to kill him. The executioner, Serezli Mehmed Ağa, placed Beşir's head on a stone for public display as a warning to others.

Following Beşir's death, the government found that he was very wealthy because of his bribes. They found a lot of jewelry, gold, money and valuable handwritten books, all which ended up in the government treasury. Beşir Ağa II, the very infamous Chief Black Eunuch noted for

his evil deeds, was the first Kızlar Ağa killed in the Kız Kulesi. He lies buried in Üsküdar under the dervish convent of Nasuhi.¹⁴

Tahsin Nejat Bey (Tahsin Ağa) was among the last of the Black eunuchs. Slave traders killed his mother in front of him in Africa and they left his younger brother in the jungle to be eaten by wild animals. Journalist Naci Sadullah interviewed him and provided a description:

He has thick lips and often smiled. He had a smart and intelligent look, his eyes as bright as a light bulb. The warmth of his eyes was reflected in his face. His chuckle sounded like a tiny hiccup. Even with such a tough life he never gave up.¹⁵

The interview took place in 1938, when Tahsin was a literature teacher in Erenkoy Girls High School, where he taught for more than 30 years. Reporter Ergun Hiçyılmaz described Tahsin's early tragic life. He said that Tahsin was very young when castrated, coming from a village in Abyssinia. His life in the palace was dreary but when he became a teacher in the Republic of Turkey his life opened up. Tahsin Ağa continued the story, indicating how he became a eunuch:

Slave traders took me to an open space where they tightly tied my legs to a pole. They tightly gagged my mouth with cloth. I had the most horrible pain of my life, but did not scream. Then they poured hot oil on me as soon as they emasculated me to prevent gangrene. I am still astonished that I did not die or lose my mind because of the pain.¹⁶

Slave traders sold him to Celal Paşa for the equivalent of three-dozen plates, three-dozen cups and 12 glass pitchers. After Celal Paşa died, he went on to the palace and finished his education, provided for in his owner's will. He became a teacher, serving in Erenkoy high school, also writing love poems.

'If you wrote a novel about your life, what would you name it?' asked Naci Sadullah in an interview. '*Scream*', he answered without hesitation, 'because I still remember my mother and brother screaming whenever I see a young woman or children screaming.'¹⁷

Cevher Ağa was the Chief Black Eunuch for Sultan Abdül Hamit II (1876–1909). Evidence of the trust placed in him was that Cevher was

responsible for taking care of former sultan Murad V, who briefly ruled in 1876. After Abdül Hamit ascended the throne, Cevher would go to the Çırağan Palace to check on Murad and report on his health, sometimes accompanying doctors. Cevher was the one chosen to report Murad's death to Abdül Hamit.¹⁸ The latter suspended parliament for 30 years and was ousted by the 'Young Turks', a liberal faction of the political party CUP (Committee of Union and Progress), in a bloodless revolution. There was an attempt to assassinate the sultan on 21 July 1905, but the resulting explosion killed 17 others instead. On 23 July 1908, the CUP informed that unless he restored the constitution within 24 hours, a Macedonian army allied with their officer corps members would march on Istanbul. The next day Abdül Hamit restored the constitution and reinstated the parliament. In the fall of 1908, there were parliamentary elections and the CUP won all but one of the 288 seats. The second parliament convened on 17 December 1908, signaling the end of the old order.¹⁹

Cevher Ağa, considered a close confidante of the sultan, became a target of the new regime. Abdül Hamit had turned the country into essentially a police state. After the adoption of the second constitution, Cevher Ağa was executed and hanged from a lamppost on the Galata Bridge on 26 March 1909. His death was not without controversy, for the story circulated that Cevher had compiled a list, the 'Denunciation List'.

Before the CUP came to power, Mustafa Kemal Inal's father, a friend of Cevher, visited the Yıldız Palace and saw him working over a document. When Cevher discovered that he was being observed, he told the father, Emin Paşa, that he was compiling a list of government personnel, many of them CUP persons, who wanted to depose the sultan and instal a democratic government. The sultan wanted Cevher to be in charge of the list as he had confidence in him. The Chief Black Eunuch explained that if a person were not a leader of the opposition he would tend to the person himself, place the list of names in a box and personally hand it to the sultan. Essentially, Cevher Ağa was part of a secret police (*hafiye*) organisation for the sultan, maintaining surveillance on the Young Turks and their allies. Abdül Hamit's personal slave Ahmed Celaleddin Paşa first headed the organisation, followed by protégé Fehim Paşa:

Under their direction was an army of spies as well as informants; they were appointed to every department of the government to

ascertain and report on the actions and thoughts of individual bureaucrats in memorandums, which were used to promote, dismiss, or even imprison those thought to be treasonous under article 113 of the Constitution.²⁰

Because Cevher knew their names, CUP officials had him eliminated. To complicate the affair, some questioned if Cevher's death was over his compiling the names of the sultan's enemies or for a related reason. If Cevher had talked, there could have been a lot of trouble for some people in the government and those on the opposing side as to whether the list contained their names or did not. Some on the list would have been enemies of the sultan while others, who were supposed to be the sultan's enemies but who were spies, would not have been on the list. Therefore, some on both sides might have thought it best to silence Cevher permanently.

One palace eunuch was caught up in the intrigue and Abdül Hamit had him tortured. Named in a *New York Times* article as Muzzafer Ağa, he supposedly revealed some palace secrets to the British ambassador. For that indiscretion he had hot, just-boiled eggs placed under his armpits in the Yıldız Palace torture chambers. Supposedly, that shocks the system so much that the person goes insane. One might wonder about the value of the information Muzzafer disclosed because he was exiled to Mecca instead of being killed.²¹

Cevher Ağa, like many privileged Ottoman eunuchs, owned slaves that they kept in their own houses. He had one for whom he constructed a house and upon whom he showered presents. Again, many people still cannot believe that a loving or caring relationship can transpire between a eunuch and a woman. Officials confiscated Cevher's possessions 'including his villa on the Bosphorus, where the authorities discovered that he had been keeping a beautiful Egyptian slave girl, who was brokenhearted when she learned of her master's death'.²²

The National Assembly met to discuss the fate of the sultan, who had secretly backed the counterrevolution of April 1909. To conform to religious law, it questioned the Grand Mufti about deposing the sultan, who was also Caliph. The Grand Mufti, after hearing the charges, agreed that Abdül Hamit II should be deposed. A delegation went to the Yıldız Palace and read the fatwa to the sultan, who came out from behind a screen to meet them. In the room, besides the delegation, were the

sultan, his secretaries, his 12-year-old son and 30 Black eunuchs. His brother Rashid was now Sultan Mehmed V.²³

Mehmed V, unlike Abdül Hamit in 1876, even allowed the Young Turk government to affect the composition of his court. He gave 1,000 of Abdül Hamit's splendid horses to the army and kept only four secretaries, four chamberlains, four ADCs and a few personal servants. The Chief Eunuch lost the rank of Highness; the Sultan's guests were served coffee in plain, rather than jewel-studded, gold cup holders.²⁴

Nadir Ağa, who would become the next Chief Black Eunuch upon Cevher's death, reported that Cevher was bad-tempered and jealous. The two men used to fight over whether there should even be a Denunciation List that Cevher compiled for the sultan. In Cevher's opinion, Nadir was young and, because of his age and inexperience, did not understand the enormity of the situation. Nadir was the last Chief Black Eunuch to Sultan Abdül Hamit II, and was an Abyssinian slave taken to the Yıldız Palace four years before the second constitution. He told the following story about his kidnapping:

Twice slave traders kidnapped me. Although I was very young, I remember my village name clearly – Limnu [...] At first, I escaped after the slave trader kidnapped me. I escaped at midnight, returned to my village passing through the jungle among lions and elephants. However, slave traders kidnapped me again, and then they took me to Saudi Arabia via the Cibusti River; then they took me to Mecca, and then they took me to Medina from Mecca, because Medina was the biggest market for the slave traders, especially for the slaves brought from Africa. There were two hundred slaves with me.²⁵

Hasan Ferit Ertuğ wrote an article about Nadir Ağa from sources and also recounted his youth. Nadir had an older sister and a brother, and his parents died when he was about six or seven years old. While still about that age, his community was attacked by slavers and, with his brother, climbed a tree to escape. However, his father was murdered. Nadir was stabbed in the chest and head, but managed to crawl home and saw dead

people in his village. He fondly remembered the cattle and the making of bread. He also remembered being raised Muslim.

When about seven or eight, Nadir was walking and a man, described as 'white', called out to him, so he went to him. The man said he would give Nadir something to carry home and, although suspicious, Nadir still went. After being taken to a house, Nadir escaped and went home. About a year-and-a-half later, there was another attempt to kidnap Nadir and this second time it was successful. The man, again described as 'white', held on to him and took him far away. When anyone saw the two of them and saw Nadir crying, the man said he was beating his son who was naughty. Slavers took him to Mecca and Medina, along with 200 others.²⁶

One Turk who interviewed him, journalist Ergun Hiçyılmaz, continued the account about Nadir's arrival at the Yıldız Palace. This is one of the only extant interviews of a Chief Black Eunuch reflecting on his early years:

He was so frail, and although he was eleven years old, he looked like he was five or six years old. No one at the slave bazaar was interested in buying him. Then, a woman purchased him and took him to Istanbul because she felt sorry for him. His life changed after Abdül Hamit decided to hire Abyssinian slaves over those from the Sudan, because for some reason the Sudanese slaves angered him. Nadir attracted Abdül Hamit's attention from among the twenty-two children in his group. He received a promotion to *musahib* [one of a pair of underlings who carried messages from the sultan to the valide sultan, the Chief Black Eunuch and the *divan*].²⁷

Ertuğ added more details. After capture, Nadir was forced to walk several days and placed in the hold of a ship that sailed to Jidda in Saudi Arabia, and then to Mecca by camel. He remembered four children on each camel that took them to the slave market. He was not purchased along with the others because he was too thin, but later taken to a castle where he was sold to a Turkish woman. Her husband, Abdullah, named him Nadir. For three years he remained in Mecca where he remembered being treated well, was called 'son' by the woman and even had a teacher.

For some reason, Nadir was taken from the family to be with a son, who was a sharif. It seemed he went back to Jidda and was placed aboard

another ship where he ate well and had a doctor in attendance. The ship took some time before it could get through the Suez Canal and he then sailed to Istanbul along with 12 other youth. Upon arrival, probably around 1880, six of the 12 were chosen to go to a new destination. It was snowing when they got into a small boat and arrived at Beşiktaş, at that time only a small Bosphorus village located near the Dolmabahçe Palace. From there he was taken to the Yıldız Palace where the Chief Black Eunuch chose him for training.²⁸

Nadir Ağa improved his skills in a short period and he became known for his trustworthiness. Abdül Hamit noted his honesty and abilities and began to confide in him, making him one of the most influential persons in the palace. He accompanied Abdül Hamit and served him. Ayşe Osmanoglu, a daughter of the sultan, stated that her father picked the right person.

Fortunately for the sultan, Nadir enhanced his reading abilities while in Mecca and he became very interested in medical books. The sultan was in need of a prescription for a condition, but it seemed to have been misread. Because of Nadir's familiarity with medicines, he was able to correct the situation and improve the sultan's health.²⁹ Nadir seemed to acquire other skills as well:

An automobile was sent from Paris for the Sultan, but no one could drive it. When Nadir Ağa started to drive it, we were all shocked at his ability, because he never drove a car before. Abdül Hamit used to love Nadir a lot, but his biggest wish was finding his family. One day he told his wish to the Sultan. After imparting his desire, the Sultan responded, 'Even if we find your family, I will never let you go. If we find your family tell them to come here; they can stay with us in the palace.' After this conversation, the Sultan contacted the king of Abyssinia, Menelik II, through special representative Maresal Masasa when he traveled to Istanbul. Nadir Ağa was very happy about that transaction. However, Nadir did not hear from Maresal Masasa for a while and started to think that he was forgotten. However, one day a large box came to the palace addressed to Nadir Ağa.³⁰

Nadir Ağa then related the story following the arrival of the box. The news that it contained, however, was disappointing:

Maresal Masasa sent a letter written in French. I listened to its translation with great excitement. It said that they had searched for my family and after investigating, they discovered that they had immigrated to Kenya. They apologised because they could not present me with positive news. Inside the box was one ingot of gold and two unique ivory carvings with a letter from the king of Abyssinia.³¹

Sultan Abdül Hamit II said that Nadir was like a son to him. However, the latter's power and influence was over following the March 31 Revolution and the dethroning of the sultan.³² Nadir Ağa recounted the story of his arrest to journalist Enis Tahsin:

That day everyone was crying and screaming. In this sad condition I saw no one who was laughing. On that day I understood that grief had a great effect on a person's health, as the palace doctor Nurettin Paşa and his assistants were running all over the harem to give injections to the women. There was no food in the palace. Soldiers brought in some olives and cheese and halva for everyone, and we distributed it in the harem. During that time Sultan Abdül Hamit drank only coffee and they came and arrested us.³³

General Ali Galip Pasiner arrested everyone in the Yıldız Palace. He said about Nadir Ağa, 'He was a clever, self-confident, well-behaved, graceful Black man, more than I expected.' They took Nadir Ağa to court before a judge and he revealed the location of the hidden gold, plus, he informed on some people, saving his own life.³⁴ The 6 June 1909 edition of the *New York Times* published information about Nadir Ağa, describing him as the late sultan's 'closest confidant'. The feature by special correspondent Francis McCullagh, dated 18 May, is very informative:

Nadir Agha, who is a slim, handsome, and very well dressed Abyssinian of 25 years of age and a man of extraordinary diplomatic and political talent, had mixed himself up so much in the crimes of Abdul Hamid that the Macedonians condemned him to death, but discovering afterward that without him they could never in all probability discover all the secret chambers and

receptacles in the Yıldız, they commuted his sentence of death into one of imprisonment for life on condition that he assist them in their searches. In the [Parliamentary] commission's report, which was presented to Parliament on May 4, Nadir Agha's name is accordingly mentioned. The report, couched though it is in bald and businesslike language, is the most amazing document ever presented to a Parliament.³⁵

Because Nadir Ağa knew where the former sultan had secreted much of his personal treasure inside and outside the Yıldız Palace, millions of dollars in today's money (at least 30 million Turkish lira at that time), he became indispensable. The same newspaper article reported that some of the gold, jewellery, cash and other precious items were believed to be at the bottom of one of the lakes on the palace grounds. Since the sultan was also a carpenter with his own shop, some of the treasure was found in secret alcoves around the palace. Further, some who assisted in stashing the fortune 'died suddenly'. Not even Nadir was privy to all of the hiding places:

A few days ago, when the chief eunuch brought some visitors through the palace, he was astonished to discover several places the existence of which he had never before suspected, which goes to show that even from people to whom he seemed to open his heart, the crafty old Padishah always kept something back.³⁶

There is another account about the search for Sultan Abdül Hamit II's treasure. Apparently, he had packed some suitcases with banknotes and jewels for contingency purposes. Commissioners went to the palace looking for documents and to recover treasure. Nadir Ağa did reveal hiding places but a Circassian slave reported some caches as well. Items found included precious vases, arms, carpets, snuff boxes studded with jewels, and more. The group also found secret journals (djournals) compiled by the sultan's spies who were from all ranks of service.

The search went on for several days at the Yıldız Palace but they could not find the bulk of what they were seeking. It was Nadir Ağa who moved a divan, a long couch that might sit on the floor or on legs with its back against the wall, raised the carpet, which revealed a trap door. The commissioners descended and met an armour-plated door, which

they were able to open, and entered into a small concrete room. Black workmen supposedly constructed the room secretly and were killed upon completing it. There were bags and valises that contained gold and banknotes amounting to 700,000 Turkish liras. In other cases were diamonds, rubies, topazes, sapphires and other jewels valued into the millions. There was also a safe containing several million shares of stocks and records of foreign bank accounts worth 25 million Turkish liras.³⁷

After his release, Nadir Ağa bought 40 cows and started to sell the milk, his life in the palace now over. Ergun Hiçyılmaz maintained that Nadir was the first person to sell milk in bottles with a stopper, indicative of his foresight. People could see him walking in the Grande Rue de Pera (İstikal Caddesi in Beyoğlu), 'dressed in the height of fashion'.³⁸ At some point, probably before he purchased the cattle, he applied for the position of official guide at the Yıldız Palace, but he was turned down. A writer at the time said that if he had been appointed, it 'would have been an illuminating experience'.³⁹

The last Chief Black Eunuch was Fahreddin Ağa, who only held the office for about a month between April and 20 May 1909. The article, 'Hayrettin Effendi, the Last Black Eunuch of Turkey', appeared in the August 2000 edition of *Black Men*. Zawadi Sagne translated Gnamankou Dieudonne's article from French. Another source the article mentioned was Hifzi Topuz's 1998 book, *Mayyale*.⁴⁰

In a very embarrassing scene on 20 May 1909, Fahreddin was attending the General Assembly dressed in his formal clothes and attempted to address the gathering. He rose and twice had to be ordered to leave that body because the old government, the Ottoman Empire, was over.⁴¹ One can only imagine the indignity suffered by someone who previously held one of the highest positions in the country.

Fahreddin Ağa, translated from the French as Hayrettin Effendi in the article, was supposedly a smart and generous man, tall in stature, and lived in a house shared with a Circassian woman also from the palace. After being officially freed from slavery in 1918, the two purchased the house together. Fahreddin was about 70 years old when he dictated the story of his life to a friend:

I'm from Habesistan. I'm a Galla. My name was Gülnata. We were living in a little village. We were very happy. I was 7 or 8 years. I was playing with some children same age than me on the village's

place. We always had the same game. We were running one after the others. Then one day, some horsemen came. They didn't look like the men from our place. Their faces were lighter. They were armed. They caught us.⁴²

The Arabic speakers took Fahreddin and placed him in a group of other sobbing children and were held three days without food and water. Their captors castrated the boys in Massawa, now located in Eritrea but at that time, according to Fahreddin, the Turks occupied the area. He never forgot the pain. Placed on boats two weeks later, it was the first time the youth had seen waves. The British, who were leaders in outlawing slavery, intercepted the boat but did not end the slavery:

During the crossing, the slave boat has been stopped and examined by an English patrol and the Arab slave traders were arrested. All of them drove [sic] to Aden port in Yemen. The children began to shout with joy believing that we can return to our villages. Our joy won't last. The interpreter made us know that it's going to be difficult to bring us back to our villages.⁴³

At the slave market the British commandant made a speech that was translated into Arabic and then into the language of the captives. Because the slave trade was illegal, 'they are going to give us to families of officers and functionaries they trust [...] the officers were Ottomans and the functionaries sanjaks'. Fahreddin ended up with an Ottoman officer named Yakub, who he viewed as a father figure, and who took him to Istanbul. Yakub 'gifted' him to Mehmet Paşa, a famous Circassian. That is an obvious example of how slavery could continue to operate in the open although it was supposedly eliminated. The inventories of 1893 and 1903 palace eunuchs list many of the African eunuchs as being 'gifted' by someone to curry favours. As Fahreddin asked, 'Can somebody offer a human as a gift?'⁴⁴

The National Assembly, through the *şeyhülislâm*, deposed Sultan Abdül Hamit II after 32 years of rule and exiled him to Salonika. Following his removal on 27 April 1909, his half-brother Mehmed was to succeed him. Abdül Hamit believed that he would have to spend the rest of his life in the *Kafes* but, upon hearing he would only be exiled, he fainted in the arms of his Chief Black Eunuch. He left the Yıldız Palace

with an escort and three wives, two sons, four concubines, five *kalfas* (female servants), four eunuchs and nine other servants. He had to leave some luggage behind and the later inspection of some trunks revealed that they contained jewelry in hidden compartments. After installing himself in his coastal villa, Abdül Hamit next sent for his cat. He then compiled a list of other items and his request was granted. He had asked for two white Indian cows, a dog, fowl, 300 electric lights, 15 more women, plus two more Black eunuchs.⁴⁵

A problem arose after 1909 with the Ottoman Bank and the account of the palace eunuchs. After Cevher Ağa's execution in that year, there were questions about how to handle his estate. The constitution of 1908 was pushing toward the legal end of slavery whereby slaves would enjoy the same rights as a free person. However, according to Muslim law, a slave's inheritance belonged to the owner. If slavery was illegal, then the estate might go to relatives but, since eunuchs did not have relatives, the Public Trustee could legally claim the estate. Yet, since the sultan had been their owner, should the estate pass to the Privy Purse? The Bank's attorney, Jacques Barozzi, had to confront that legal question.⁴⁶

The Ministry of Imperial Endowments, in its letter of 13 August 1909, requested that the deceased Chief Black Eunuch's cash and securities be turned over to them. Was Cevher Ağa at the time of his death legally a free man or a slave? Although slavery was forbidden since 23 March 1880, slavery still continued in Turkey. The attorney's opinion seemed to be that, since imperial decrees no longer had any standing under the current law, the estate might pass to the Public Trustee. However, more information was requested.⁴⁷

The attorney's decision is no clearer in the estate of Said Fahreddin Ağa as seen in a letter from the Ottoman Bank dated 28 December 1910. This may not be the same Fahreddin Ağa who was Chief Black Eunuch but the date of death appears to be the same. In any case, the Privy Purse requested that the savings account of the deceased be transferred to them since he was part of the palace system. Whatever the outcomes, the implications surrounding this contestation over what could be valuable estates of the palace eunuchs were not trivial. In this case, the sum was 8,200 kuruş.⁴⁸

Mehmed VI (Vahideddin) served as sultan from July 1918 to November 1922, when he fled the country. His bandmaster, his personal physician and the court chamberlain were the only ones who knew he

escaped through an opening made in the unused Mata Gate. Neither his wives, including his 22-year-old wife of nine weeks, nor the remaining eunuchs knew of his plans. The seven palace eunuchs who had served the sultan for five years were distraught. Meanwhile, deputies in Ankara elected Crown Prince Abdülmecid as Caliph only.⁴⁹

After the dissolution of the Ottoman court in 1924, many of the palace eunuchs found other work, some stayed with people they had served and some went to other countries. The court of Tunis recruited some of them.⁵⁰ Esther Pohl Lovejoy was in Istanbul in 1933 and saw some of the eunuchs. Her reporting style takes on the air of nostalgia for the past glories of a city now forcefully thrust into the twentieth century. While some of her observations are stereotypical, her own words still provide the reader with her sense of loss and even wonderment as a new world order was advancing:

What is left of the Seraglio is a museum now, and the most interesting exhibits are the surviving eunuchs collected from the deposed sultan's palaces. On the day of my last visit, several of these wrinkled 'antikas' were basking in the sun like old, old tabby-cats. Neither male nor female, their experiences have been peculiar. Nevertheless, perhaps a living eunuch is better than a dead sultan. No one knows – not even a eunuch.

What do they talk about in their queer, squeaky voices? The glory of the old sultans and the beauty of their concubines? Such memories! Just out yonder near the mouth of the Golden Horn, where the birds are flying so close to the waves, some of the favourites, who had lost favour, were drowned in the dark of the moon. But that was a long time ago, and perhaps the eunuchs have forgotten.

Turkey has changed. Under the new regime, the eunuchs are out of their element, and they may be confidentially animadverting upon what the world is coming to. Women are permitted to run loose without care or restraint. Bold, bare-faced creatures! Immodesty, in the good old days, led to the bottom of the Bosphorus.

But after all, life is comic, and the eunuchs may be sniggering at foreign tourists snooping through the private apartments of the old harems. These sexless relics are at home in those quarters, and

they may question the propriety of this innovation. Secretiveness is a habit with them, and just between themselves they may go so far as to criticise the program of the Great Ghazi [Ataturk], and his *graven image* standing so brazenly in front of the old seraglio.

[...] Safe in the Sultan's garden on the European side of the Bosphorus, the eunuchs look over the water to the Towers of Asia and to the Princes Islands in the Marmora, where excess princes used to be imprisoned. Poor things! Some of them took sick and died quite suddenly. And there is the Island of Prinkipo [Büyükaada], just a short distance out in the sea. Such a convenient island! It suggests Russia – reminiscences of the past, anecdotes old and seasoned. Russia was always close to Turkey – too close. Just before the Crimean War, Czar Nicholas I dubbed Turkey, 'the Sick Man.' Well, the disease has spread. Other countries are sick too, especially Russia. Czars and Sultans have been swept from the earth. They are all dead and gone, save a few 'antikas' at the old seraglio with a breath of the Marmora in their withered bodies, and, perhaps, a senile chuckle in their throats, as they gaze at the Island of Prinkipo, where Leon Trotsky is a guarded exile.⁵¹

However, the story of the eunuchs as a group continued even after Esther Lovejoy's sentimental commentary, for it appears that some of them sought jobs elsewhere, as reported in the 16 July 1935, issue of the *New York Times*. In an article titled 'Eunuchs to Aid Ethiopia', 200 of them who served under Sultans Abdül Hamit II and Sultan Mehmed VI offered their services to the Ethiopian Army. They telegraphed the former royal harem chief who was visiting Ankara from Ethiopia and made an offer to protect the life of Emperor Haile Selassie. The *Times* printed, 'The former harem guards are a picked force, all of giant stature and famed for their bravery. They are skilled with sword, spear and lance.'⁵² There does not seem to be any follow-up regarding success or failure, but they would still continue to be conversational material in Istanbul.

Some of the palace eunuchs, such as Nadir Ağa, managed to stay in Istanbul where they lived out their lives, along with other former members of the sultans' households. Because many of them did not have much money to fend for themselves, they formed a retirement association, the Eski Emecktarlar Yardun Birliği, where they pooled

resources to aid each other. Nadir Ağa was mentioned as one of this group's organizers and a photograph exists that shows him at one of the meetings.⁵³ The old order might have disappeared, but there were still some reminders. The last surviving palace eunuch could be seen walking the streets at least into the mid-1970s.

APPENDICES

REIGN OF THE BÂBÜSSÂDE AGA (BÂBÜSSÂDE GATE OF THE THIRD COURTYARD, GATE OF THE WHITE EUNUCHS) UNTIL MEHMED AGA*

Selim I (24 Apr. 1512–21 Sep. 1520)		
Hasan Âga	1512–1520	
Husrev Âga	1520–1524	
Süleyman I (Kanunî) (30 Sep. 1520–6 Sep. 1566)		
Mustafa (Karabaş)	1524–1530/31	Died 1530/31
Haydar Âga		
Mahmud Âga	–1554	Died 1554
Davud Âga	1554–1555	Died 1555
Cafer Âga	1555–1557	Died 1557
Hasan Âga	1557–1564	Died 1564–1565
Ya’kub Âga	1564–1566	Died 1566–1567
Selim II (24 Sep. 1566–12 Dec. 1574)		
Mahmud Âga	1566–1572	Died 1574
İbrahim Âga		Died 1580
Gazanfer Âga	1572→	
Murad III (22 Dec. 1574–16 Jan. 1595)		
Gazanfer Âga	←1603	Beheaded 1603

**REIGN OF THE DÂRÜSSÂDE AGA (THE NEXT INNER GATE AFTER THE
BÂBÜSSÂDE GATE, KNOWN AS THE BLACK EUNUCH GATE)****

Murad III (Continued)	Mehmed Ağa (Habeshi) Server Ağa Sünbül Ağa Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa	1574–Dec. 1590 Jan./Feb. 1591–Jul. 1592 1592–1592 Jul. 1593→	Died Jan.–Feb. 1591 Died circa 1593, Egypt
Mehmed III (27 Jan. 1595–23 Dec. 1603)	Ak Ağa Hacı Mustafa Ağa Osman Ağa İbrahim Ağa Abdürrezzak Ağa	←Jan./Feb. 1596 Feb. 1596–Dec. 1602 Dec. 1602–Jun. 1603 6 Dec. 1603→	Died 1596, Egypt Beheaded Dec. 1602 Executed 6 Jan. 1603
Ahmed I (23 Dec. 1603–21 Nov. 1617)	Abdürrezzak Ağa Reyhan Ağa Mustafa Ağa (Hacı)	←9 Jan. 1604 9 Jan. 1604–4 Dec. 1605 4 Dec. 1605→	Resigned, Executed 1604 Died 1615
Mustafa I (22 Nov. 1617–26 Feb. 1618)	Mustafa Ağa (Hacı)		
Osman II (Genç) (26 Feb. 1618–19 May 1622)	Mustafa Ağa (Hacı) Süleyman Ağa İsmail Ağa (Malatyalı) Ak Ağa Süleyman Ağa	←Mar./Apr. 1620 Mar./Apr. 1620–5 May 1622 5 May 1622–1622 1622→	Exiled to Egypt, Died 1624 Killed May 1622 Exiled
Mustafa I (20 May 1622–10 Sep. 1623) [second time]	Ak Ağa Süleyman Ağa	←9 Sep. 1623	Died 1635/36
Murad IV (10 Sep. 1623–9 Feb. 1640)	Mustafa Ağa (Hacı) [second time] İdris Ağa İbrahim Ağa	9 Sep. 1623–Jul. 1624 Jul./Aug. 1624–Jan. 1640 2 Feb. 1640–Apr. 1640	Died Jul./Aug. 1624 Died 9 Feb. 1640 Died 1640/41, Arabia
İbrahim (9 Feb. 1640–8 Aug. 1648)	Sünbül Ağa (Hoca) Abdülkadir Ağa Hoca Sünbül Ağa (Saniyen) Ali Ağa (Taşyattır) İbrahim Ağa (Celâli) İshak Ağa Mehmed Ağa (Musâhib) İshak Ağa [second time] Meş'ud Ağa (Musâhib) İbrahim Ağa (Celâli) [second time]	Apr. 1640–Apr. 1644 Apr./May 1644–Apr./May 1644 Apr./May 1644–Sep./Oct. 1644 Sep./Oct. 1644–Sep./Oct. 1645 Sep./Oct. 1645–May/Jun. 1647 May/Jun. 1647–Aug./Sep. 1647 Aug./Sep. 1647–Aug. 1647 Sep. 1647–Oct./Nov. 1647 Oct./Nov. 1647–Apr./May 1648 Apr./May 1648→	Killed Nov. 1644 Transferred, Eski Serray Died 1 Nov. 1644 Died 1655 Died 1651 Died Sep./Oct. 1647 Died 1648 Died 1650/51
Mehmed IV (8 Aug. 1648–8 Nov. 1687)	İbrahim Ağa (Celâli) Mehmed Ağa (Kız/Küçük) Süleyman Ağa (Lala) Behrâm Ağa Dilâver Ağa Mehmed Ağa (Solak) Musli Ağa Abbas Ağa Yusuf Ağa Ali Ağa (Hazinedar)	←24 Oct. 1649 24 Oct. 1649–9 Sep. 1651 9 Sep. 1651–Jul. 1652 Jul. 1652–Jan. 1656 4 Jan. 1656–6 Jan. 1658 6 Jan. 1658–17 Jun. 1663 17 Jun. 1663–Mar. 1668 9 Apr. 1668–16 Jul. 1671 16 Jul. 1671–29 Oct. 1687 29 Oct. 1687→	Died 1650/51, Egypt Died 1676, Egypt Banished, died 1676/77 Killed 4 Jan. 1656 Exiled to Egypt Died 1663, Egypt Died Apr. 1668 Exiled to Egypt Exiled to Egypt, died 1717
Süleyman II (9 Nov. 1687–22 Jun. 1691)	Ali Ağa (Hazinedar) Mustafa Ağa Ahmed Ağa (Karagöz/Gedâli)	←Jan. 1688 Jan. 1688–Dec. 1689 Dec. 1689→	Died circa 1713, Egypt Died in Egypt, 1692

Ahmed II (22 Jun. 1691–6 Feb. 1695)	Ahmed Ağa (Karagöz/Gedaî) İsmail Ağa (Uzun) Nezir Ağa (Kaba) İshak Ağa	←Jun. 1691 23 Jun. 1691–25 Mar. 1692 25 Mar. 1692–7 Apr. 1694 7 Apr. 1694→	Died 22 Jun. 1691 Died circa 1695, Egypt Died circa 1694, Egypt
Mustafa II (Gazi) (6 Feb. 1695–22 Aug. 1703)	İshak Ağa Ali Ağa (Yapraksız) Nezir Ağa (Solak/Kaba)	←Jul. 1695 Jul. 1695–May 1701 May 1701–Apr. 1704	Died circa 1695, Egypt Died 1701, Egypt Killed 1704, Greece
Ahmed III (22 Aug. 1703–1 Oct. 1730)	Abdurrahman Ağa (Küçük) Süleyman Ağa (Uzun) Mehmed Ağa (Anber) Mercan Ağa Beşir Ağa I (Hacı)	Apr. 1704–Apr./May 1704 17 May 1704–21 May 1713 21 May 1713–Mar./Apr. 1717 Mar./Apr. 1717–Nov. 1717 Nov. 1717→	Killed Aug. 1727, Eyüp Exiled, died 1727/28, Cyprus Exiled, died Egypt 1717 Died 1720/21
Mahmud I (Gazi/Kambur) (2 Oct. 1730–13 Dec. 1754)	Beşir Ağa I (Hacı) Beşir Ağa II (Morali Beşir) Beşir Ağa III (Hazineder)	←3 Jun. 1746 2 Jun. 1746–8 Jul. 1752 11 Jul. 1752→	Died 3 Jun. 1746, aged 96 Killed 7 Jul. 1752, Üsküdar
Osman III (14 Dec. 1754–30 Oct. 1757)	Beşir Ağa III (Hazineder) Ahmed Ağa (Ebûvukuf)	←28 Aug. 1755 28 Aug. 1755→	Exiled to Egypt, died 1759
Mustafa III (30 Oct. 1757–21 Jan. 1774)	Ahmed Ağa (Ebûvukuf) Musahib Beşir Ağa (IV) Mercan Ağa Cevher Ağa (Hazineder) Beşir Ağa V (Sarıncı)	←8 Nov. 1757 8 Nov. 1757–8 Jun. 1768 9 Jun. 1768–Aug. 1772 5 Aug. 1772–2 Feb. 1774 8 Feb. 1774→	Executed 27 Nov. 1757 Died 8 Jun. 1768 Died 5 Aug. 1772 Sent to Egypt, Died 1787
Abdül Hamit I (Abdülhamit I) (21 Jan. 1774–7 Apr. 1789)	Beşir Ağa V (Sarıncı) Cevher Ağa (Hazineder) [second time] İdris Ağa	←16 Aug. 1779 Aug./Sep. 1779–2 Jun. 1783 3 Jun. 1783–c. 1789/90	Exiled to Medina Died after 1783 Died 1796/97
Selim III (Cilhandar/İlhami) (7 Apr. 1789–29 May 1807)	Bilâl Ağa (Büyük) Halid Ağa Bilâl Ağa (Küçük)	1790–Oct. 1791 1791–1798 29 Aug. 1798–Mar. 1807	Died Oct. 1791 Died 29 Aug. 1798 Died 27 Mar. 1807
Mustafa IV (29 May 1807–28 Jul. 1808)	Mercan Ağa (Küçük)	7 Mar. 1807→	
Mahmud II (Adli) (28 Jul. 1808–1 Jul. 1839)	Mercan Ağa (Küçük) Kasim Ağa Anber Mehmed Ağa İsâ Ağa (Hafız) Ebûbekir Ağa	←29 Jul. 1808 29 Jul. 1808–15 Nov. 1811 6 Sep. 1812–14 Sep. 1815 14 Sep. 1815–19 Sep. 1823 91 Sep. 1823–13 Nov. 1825 13 Nov. 1825→	Beheaded 30 Jul. 1808 Died 1822/23 Died circa 1827 Died 1826/27 Died 13 Nov. 1825
Abdullah Ağa (Leylek/Uzun)	Abdullah Ağa (Leylek/Uzun)		
Abdülmeccid I (Abdülmeccit/Gazi) (1 Jul. 1839–25 Jun. 1861)	Abdullah Ağa (Paşa Çıragı) Tâhir Ağa Tayfur Ağa Mehmed Arif Ağa	←1839 Jan./Feb. 1839–7 Oct. 1840 7 Oct. 1840–c. 1844 25 Sep. 1844–18 Apr. 1850 18 Apr. 1850–2 May 1855	Died Jul. 1840/41 Died 1840 Died 25 Sep. 1844 Died Nov/Dec. 1851 Died 16 Dec. 1863
Mehmed Besim Ağa	Mehmed Besim Ağa Hüseyn Ağa Râsim Mehmed Ağa Tahsin Ağa Hayreddin Ağa Visâleddin Ağa	2 May 1855–1 Aug. 1855 1 Aug. 1855–7 Mar. 1856 7 Mar. 1856–3 Aug. 1856 3 Aug. 1856–May/Jun. 1859 May/Jun. 1859–13 Jan. 1861 13 Jan. 1861–26 Jun. 1861	Died 1871/72 Died 1857/58 Died 25 Nov. 1874 Died 1859 Died 1873/74 Died 1888/89
Abdül Aziz I (Abdülaziz) (25 Jun. 1861–30 May 1876)	Talha Ağa Cevher Ağa	27 Jun. 1861–4 Nov. 1875 31 Mar. 1876–30 May 1876	Died 31 Mar. 1876 Died 3 Sep. 1887

Murad V (Mehmed Murad V) (30 May 1876–31 Aug. 1876)		
Süleyman Ağa (Lala)	30 May 1876→	
Abdül Hamit II (Gazi/Kanlı/Bedros) (31 Aug. 1876–27 Apr. 1909)		
Süleyman Ağa (Lala)	←31 Aug. 1876	Died 1880
Nureddin Ağa	31 Aug. 1876–30 Sep. 1880	Died 30 Sep. 1880
Behrâm Ağa (Hafız)	28 Sep. 1880–Aug. 1887	Died 12 Aug. 1887
Şerefeddin Ağa	13 Aug. 1887–21 Sep. 1888	Died Jan. 1889
Mehmed Yâver Ağa	22 Sep. 1888–14 Jan. 1898	Died 14 Jan. 1898
Abdülhamî Ağa	1898–1901	
Tayfur Ağa (Thakib)	9 Sep. 1901–1908	
Cevher Ağa	1909–26 May 1909	Hanged, 26 May 1909
Nadir Ağa	26 Mar. 1909–31 Mar. 1909	Died, 1962
Mehmed V (Reşad/Gazi) (27 Apr. 1909–3 Jul. 1918)		
Fahreddin Ağa	Apr. 1909–20 May 1909	Died 1977
Mehmed VI (Vahideddin) (3 Jul. 1918–1 Nov. 1922)		
Abdûlmecid II (Caliph only) (18 Nov. 1922–3 Mar. 1924)		

*Bâbüssâde and Dârüssaâde refer to palace gate positions of the Black and White eunuchs, and not necessarily the colour of the eunuch. At least one of the chief eunuchs in the former period might have been Black and at least one in the latter period was White.

**Several sources have varying and sometimes conflicting dates for the reigns of the Chief Black Eunuchs.

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537	Hagia Sophia, dedicated by Justinian and Theodora, opens.
622	Exodus of Prophet Muhammad and companions from Mecca to Medina.
629	Bilal, an Abyssinian slave, becomes the first muezzin.
647	Muslims first encounter North Africa, according to tradition.
1040–1157	Seljuk Empire rises in the Middle East.
1055	Seljuk Turks rule Baghdad.
1071	Seljuk Turks seize Asia Minor.
1301	Osman I founds the Ottoman Empire.
1326	Orhan Gazi establishes the first Ottoman capital at Bursa.
1361	Murad I conquers Adrianople (Edirne).
1422	First Ottoman siege of Constantinople.
1451	Mehmed II ascends the Ottoman throne for the second time.
1453	Mehmed II (The Conqueror) enters Constantinople, 29 May.
1459	Construction begins on the Topkapı Palace.
1462	Empire extends to include Bosnia.
1492	Spanish Jews find refuge in the Ottoman Empire.
1514	Empire extends to include Azerbaijan.
1516	Empire extends to include Syria and Palestine.
1517	Empire extends to include Egypt, Mecca and Medina.
1520	Suleiman I (The Lawgiver/The Magnificent) ascends the throne.
1521	Empire extends to include Belgrade.
1526	Empire extends to include Mohács (South Hungary).
1529	First Ottoman siege of Vienna.
1534	Empire extends to include Hejaz, Yemen, Tunis and Iraq.
1540s	Empire extends to include Greece.
1551	Empire extends in North Africa to Morocco.
1571	Empire loses the Western Mediterranean at the Battle of Lepanto.

- 1573 Ottomans capture Cyprus.
- 1591 White eunuchs' powers transferred to the Black eunuchs.
- 1639 Ottomans' final conquest of Iraq.
- 1669 Crete taken.
- 1683 Ottomans narrowly defeated at Vienna, for the second time.
- 1699 Ottomans surrender Hungary, Transylvania and Podolia (western Ukraine).
- 1717–46 Hacı Beşir Ağa's term as Chief Black Eunuch.
- 1718 Ottomans lose Serbia and Walachia (South Rumania and Bucharest).
- 1719 Earthquake and plague in Istanbul cause 150,000 deaths.
- 1720s The 'Tulip Age'.
- 1730 Patrona Halil uprising.
- 1735–39 Ottomans regain Serbia and Walachia.
- 1750 Two major fires, an earthquake and plague decimate Istanbul.
- 1774 Ottomans lose Black Sea north coast, Crimea and Bessarabia to Russia.
- 1786 A third of Istanbul dies of plague.
- 1798–1801 French invade Egypt.
- 1800 Russians annex Georgia.
- 1826 Janissary Corps destroyed during the 'Auspicious Event'.
- 1830–31 French invade Algeria and Tunisia.
- 1839 Tanzimat (Re-ordering) era begins with Gülhane Edict.
- 1846 Official closing of slave markets in Istanbul.
- 1853–56 Crimean War. Russia cedes some territory to Turkey.
- 1878 Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria independent through the Congress of Berlin.
- 1878 Sultan Abdül Hamit dissolves the parliament created the year before.
- 1881 French occupy Tunisia.
- 1882 British occupy Egypt.
- 1889 The Orient Express makes its first run.
- 1894 Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) forms.
- 1908 Young Turks come to power and restore 1876 constitution.
- 1909 Fahreddin Ağa becomes the last Chief Black Eunuch.
- 1911 Italy conquers Tripoli.

1912	Turkey loses all European territories in the First Balkan War.
1913	Turkey regains Adrianople (Edirne) and establishes its western boundary at Maritsa River in the Second Balkan War.
1914–18	Ottoman Empire joins German side in World War I.
1915–16	Allies defeated in Gallipoli campaign.
1917	British occupy Baghdad and Jerusalem.
1918	End of Ottoman rule in Arab lands.
1920	Allied forces occupy Istanbul and Ottomans confined to Anatolia.
1923	Sultanate abolished and Turkish Republic declared.
1924	Caliphate abolished and Ottoman dynasty exiled.
1928	Istanbul becomes the official name of Constantinople.

APPENDIX I

List of Sultans and their Chief Eunuchs

APPENDIX II

Some Important Dates in Ottoman History

NOTES

Introduction

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Chapter 5 Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire

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32. Hamadeh, "Splash and Spectacle", 124.
33. Nuran Kara Pilehvarian, Nur Urfalıoğlu and Lütfi Yazıcıoğlu, *Fountains in Ottoman Istanbul* (Istanbul, Turkey: YEM Yayın, 2000), 21.

Chapter 8 Personal Descriptions of the Chief Black Eunuchs

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5. Ibid., vol. 4, 1363.
6. Ibid., vol. 5, 1543.
7. Ibid., vol. 1, 317.
8. Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society*, 101.
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12. Malik-Khanam, *Thirty Years in the Harem*, 143.

13. Barnard Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen* (New York: NY: G. P. Putnam and Company, 1856), 336.
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20. Barber, *The Lords of the Golden Horn*, 34.
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23. Nitisha Sultana, *My Harem Life: An Intimate Autobiography of the Sultan's Favorite* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1939), 63–64.
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25. Penzer, *The Harem*, 130–131.
26. Sultana, *My Harem Life*, 63.
27. Scholz, *Eunuchs and Castrati*, 194.
28. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 98.
29. Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, vol. 1, 283.
30. Douglas Scott Brookes, trans. and ed., *The Concubine, the Princess, and the Teacher: Voices from the Ottoman Harem* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 172. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bogazici/docDetail.action?docID=10273741>.
31. *Ibid.*, 58.
32. *Ibid.*, 172–173.
33. Andrews, “The Oriental Eunuchs”, 177.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Remondino, *History of Circumcision*, 102.
36. Hikmet and Felix Regnault, “Les eunuques de Constantinople”, 237.
37. *Ibid.*, 234.
38. *Ibid.*, 235.
39. *Ibid.*, 238–239.
40. Barber, *The Sultans*, 200.
41. Julius Tander and Siegfried Grosz, “Über den Einfluss der Kastraten auf den Organismus I: Beschreibung eines Eunuchenskelets”, *Archiv auf Entwicklungsmechanik der Organismen* 27 (1909): 35–45; and Julius Tander and Siegfried Grosz, “Über den Einfluss der Kastraten auf den Organismus II: Die Skopzen”, *Archiv auf Entwicklungsmechanik der Organismen* 30 (1910): 236–253.
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Chapter 9 Personal Lives of the Chief Black Eunuchs

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4. Richard Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, vol. 5 (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1994), 46.
5. Penzer, *The Harem*, 143–144.
6. Croutier, *Harem*, 135.
7. Aksit, *The Mystery of the Ottoman Harem*, 110.
8. Ibid., 81.
9. Akbar Muhammad, “The Image of Africans in Arabic Literature: Some Unpublished Manuscripts”, in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. 1, *Islam and the Ideology of Enslavement*, ed. John Ralph Willis (London, England: Frank Cass, 1985): 63–64.
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11. Ambassador Hotel and Historical Centre, “İstanbul Sadullah Paşa Waterside Mansion”. <http://www.istanbulambassadorhotel.com/istanbulmap/>.
12. Aksit, *The Mystery of the Ottoman Harem*, 82.
13. Badr and Crecelius, “The Awqaf of Al-Hajj Bashir Agha in Cairo”, 293–295 passim.
14. Ibid.
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16. Ibid., 76.
17. Ibid., 76.
18. Ibid., 74.
19. Freely, *Inside the Seraglio*, 302–303.
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21. “The Torture Chamber of the Sultan”, *New York Times*, 28 March 1909. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/96984449?accountid=9645>.
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23. Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 577–578.
24. Philip Mansel, *Sultans in Splendor: Monarchs of the Middle East, 1869–1945* (New York, NY: The Vendome Press, 1989), 3.
25. Ok, *Harem Dünyası, Harem Agalari* (Istanbul, Turkey: Kamer Yayınları, 1997), 70–71.
26. Hasan Ferit Ertuğ, “Musahib-i Sani-i Hazret-i Şehr-Yâri: Nadir Ağa’nın Hatıratı-I”, *Toplumsalai Tarib* 049 (1998): 8–12.
27. Ok, *Harem Dünyası, Harem Agalari*, 71.
28. Ertuğ, “Musahib-i Sani-i Hazret-i Şehr-Yâri”, 9–13.
29. Ibid., 15.

30. Ok, *Harem Dünyası, Harem Agalari*, 71.
31. Ibid., 72.
32. Although called the “March 31 Revolution” or “March 31 Case”, that is the date of the Ottoman calendar in use at that time. In the current calendar the date would be 13 April 1909.
33. Ok, *Harem Dünyası, Harem Agalari*, 72–73.
34. Ibid., 73.
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38. Ok, *Harem Dünyası, Harem Agalari*, 73.
39. Young, *Constantinople*, 239.
40. Gnamamkou Dieudonne, “Hayrettin Effendi, the Last Black Eunuch of Turkey”. Black Men, August 2000. <http://lists.topica.com/lists/TheBlackList/read/message.html?mid=911087102>.
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42. Dieudonne, “Hayrettin Effendi, the Last Black Eunuch of Turkey”.
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At the height of the Ottoman Empire, Black eunuchs – rare, castrated slaves imported from Africa – became a key part of court politics. Unlike White eunuchs, who were only permitted outside the palace, Black eunuchs had access to the harem – the sultan's inner court. The Chief Black Eunuch, appointed personally by the sultan, had both the ear of the leader of a vast Islamic empire, and power over a network of spies and informers, including eunuchs and slaves throughout Constantinople and beyond. The story of these remarkable individuals, who rose from difficult beginnings to become amongst the most powerful people in the Ottoman Empire, is rarely told. George Junne places their stories in the context of the wider history of African slavery, and sets them at the centre of Ottoman history. *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire* marks a new direction in the study of courtly politics and power in Constantinople.

George Junne is a professor in Africana Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. He is also a member of the Western Social Science Association (WSSA) and former associate editor of its journal. He is the author of *A History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Colored Infantry of the Civil War* (2012). He has been a visiting professor at Boğaziçi University for many years, and is an expert on the role and history of Black slaves and eunuchs.